



## **A Last Chance** by **Nightlock700**

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**Summary:** It is the late winter/early spring of 1984. Mike appears to be fine on the outside, but only his closest friend, Lucas, can see that he still misses Eleven terribly. As the boy tries to convince Mike to let go and move on, Hopper finds something hopeful. It's too late for his own daughter, but could he have a chance at saving someone else's? Mike/Eleven Hopper/Joyce Jonathan/Nancy

# 1. Displaced

Authors Note: First and foremost I want to thank everyone who's read and/or going to read more of this story. This is my first time uploading anything of mine so I'm happy to receive as MUCH criticism/reviews as I can so I can get better at this sort of thing. I also feel obligated to note that this story contains MAJOR spoilers pertaining to the series itself, so I **strongly** recommend that you **don't** read this until **after** you've finished all eight episodes of season one. Without further ado...*enjoy!*

## Chapter One - Displaced

"Will the Wise casts protection and the Displacer Beast roars in anger, SLAMMING his paws into the ground. His long, spiked tentacles flick about angrily and his black ears fold back in fury. He readies himself, then strikes...BAM!" Mike's hands slammed into the table for added effect. The boys flinched back in shock, entirely engrossed in their imaginary realm of Dungeons and Dragons.

"The protection spell saved us, right?!" Dustin demanded. Mike nodded, grinning mischievously to himself.

"Are you sure you even know what you're doing Dustin?" Lucas prodded his friend's shoulder quizzically. As far as the many beasts they'd fought, Dustin knew the most about them – aside from Mike, who HAD to know their abilities as Dungeon Master – and helped his friends cooperate to defeat the monsters.

"Yeah! We have to be careful though, Displacer Beasts can project images of themselves so it looks like they're standing in one spot when he's really somewhere else..." Lucas and Will eyed each other worriedly.

"Well how do we land a hit?" Lucas asked.

"We have to cast a location spell on it...or risk the chances of missing...then getting hit...and dying..." The entire party looked at Will.

He knowingly smiled, "I can do that." Will picked up the die and tossed it onto the game board.

"He got a seven!" Lucas announced.

"The cat-like creature's image vibrates for a second, and then it fades as his true position is revealed..." Mike peers frightfully around the room, searching for the invisible feline. Suddenly, he points and shouts, "*He's perched in a tree, ready to pounce!*" His friends immediately began shouting over each other, bickering over what to do next. There was something so hilarious about being the Dungeon Master; maybe it was watching his friends argue over imaginary troubles. He liked to think it was seeing his friends overcome these great obstacles unscathed. As Mike lowered his finger, he watched his friends scramble for the die.

"Lucas, shoot it down with your bow!" Dustin hastily suggested. Will leaned forwards excitedly as Lucas shook the die in clasped hands.

"I shoot three poison-tipped arrows at it!" Lucas announced, tossing the die. He gets a ten and the party cheers, rising from their seats in exaltation.

Mike continues his animated narration, "All three of the arrows *pierce* the beast's chest and he *howls* in pain! His claws leave trails as he slides down the tree, his tentacles *reaching* out for the three adventurers *desperately*. He **hits** the ground and hisses one last time, 'My brethren will avenge me!' And then, just when the Displacer Beast appeared beaten, **HE**-"

"BOYS! Dinner!" Mrs. Wheeler called from above. Lucas, Dustin and Will all let out a collective groan as Mike stretched his arms over his head.

"Aren't you gonna finish the narration?" Will pressed.

"Nah...it's basically dead. You guys killed the Displacer Beast," Mike put plainly with a smile, packing up his campaign book. Each of them simultaneously drew a relieved breath.

"For a second, I thought we were screwed," Lucas admitted. "I wasn't

sure I would hit it."

"Oh *please!* Displacer Beasts are nothing compared to Dragons and... Demogorgons," Dustin stressed the last word, raising his eyebrows.

"Yeah...I don't think any of us will have trouble with Demogorgons anymore," Will stated, smiling broadly.

"Yeah, you're right," Lucas snickered, lightly tapping his friend's shoulder with a closed fist.

"You guys can go on up. I'll be right behind you," Mike said. The three boys nodded, noisily chasing each other up the stairs. As Mike finished scribbling down today's progress, he couldn't help but peer over at his radio. It sat nestled comfortably amidst the blankets and pillows he'd set up beneath the tiny fortress. There was even that same pair of sweatpants and the blue sweatshirt piled neatly between the two chairs.

*Was there any point in still keeping it up? It'd been half a year since she'd slept there...* Mike stepped cautiously over to the fort, as if he expected her to suddenly climb through the wall and into that very spot. *Was she even still...?* His hand grasped the thin sheet acting as the roof of the fort, but he froze in place.

"Mike."

The boy spun around, staring at his friend standing on the stairs. "Oh! Lucas...it's just you..." Mike trailed off, turning back towards the fort. He could hear Lucas descending the rest of the stairs and crossing the room to stand behind him.

After a long silence, a hand landed on Mike's shoulder. "Come on Mike...you gotta let it go..."

"I know..." Mike sighed, gingerly grasping the edge of the sheet and draping it over the entrance. He told himself he wouldn't do this again; this sick cycle of contemplation, depression, regret, and acceptance.

"I'm sorry Mike..." Lucas looked down at his shoes. "We really miss her too..." There was another huge silence, and for a second the

rowdy dinner table banter dipped in volume as well. It was like the entire house was holding its breath, waiting on Mike to climb the stairs and leave the empty fort behind.

"I know..." Mike repeated. Lucas patted him on the shoulder, crossing the room and slowly ascending the stairs. Mike was still standing there before the chairs, staring down at the radio. He couldn't bring himself to take it down or remove anything from its spot. So he would finish this cycle of loss in silence, following his waiting friend up the stairs and to the dinner table.

"Hey Mike...everything okay?" Mrs. Wheeler asked.

"Yeah," Lucas and he both replied at once, eyeing the other in surprise.

Mike continued, "I'm fine..." Dustin lowered his gaze to his plate as if in mourning. Will gave him a concerned look while Holly was too preoccupied with the intricacies of her napkin to sense the oppressive atmosphere hanging over the quiet table. It wasn't until after she'd crumpled it into a paper ball did Mike break the silence. "Dinner smells awesome!" he noted, eyeing the thick slices of ham adorning his plate.

"Yeah! I'm glad none of us are Jewish," Dustin commented. All occupants at the table eyed him incredulously as his joke began to deflate. "...because we wouldn't get to enjoy...the ham..." he trailed off, squeezing the life out of his fork. A grimace crossed Mike's face as Lucas pursed his lips as if in pain.

"...right! Well, I hope you guys enjoy it!" Mrs. Wheeler said, trying to curtail the now awkward silence. This wasn't anything new; Mike's friends were normally quite rowdy downstairs, but when it came to supper, their social graces deserted them entirely. Karen knew that this was just another one of those nights, but she smiled nonetheless. Will was here, seated right beside her son through means that escaped her. She was never certain how he'd survived his complicated ordeal...especially since they'd all attended his funeral following the discovery of his "fake body" in the quarry. Mike made a quirky face at Dustin as Lucas began laughing into his milk cup, and Mrs. Wheeler was just glad Will was still here. The youngest end of

the table began giggling, then kicking each other (mostly Dustin kicking Mike) beneath the table. Holly watched them all, eyes widening frightfully. "Boys..." Mrs. Wheeler warned.

"Sorry Mom," Mike apologized before giving Dustin a final kick in the ankle. He winced and silently screamed his pain. They quickly returned to smiles and end-of-the-day chatter soon after this tiny battle.

As Mrs. Wheeler set about washing the dishes, her husband lounged in his La-Z Boy recliner, snoring loudly. The boys were picking spots to sleep in Mike's room. Karen had been feeling generous, so when Mike had popped the question she'd called all their parents asking if they could stay over. "I know this is a bit last minute but the boys are having such a blast...plus Mike's been a little down lately..." she trailed off, checking to see if Mike was near. "I think some time with his friends might do him good. If Will can't stay, then I have *no* problem driving him back to your place."

"Oh, he can stay! No problem at all," Joyce assured her over the phone. "Will's been acting a bit different too..." she said, attempting to relate. She remembered Hopper and her rescuing him in the Upside Down but continued chattering on about some made-up reason for Will's odd behavior. Hopper had sworn her to secrecy, and unfortunately that meant the occasional lie and fake excuse. Jonathan began untying his shoes and relaxing. Joyce gave him a thumbs up, knowing that he had to work early tomorrow morning. He grinned and waved goodnight to his mother, turning in for the night. "...but yes! It'll definitely be good for him to be with his friends."

"So it's alright with you?"

"Yep!" Joyce confirmed. "Thanks for giving me a heads up Karen. I hope they won't be *too* loud..." she joked, running a hand through her brown wispy hair. They laughed through the phone lines as Joyce added, "Oh I've been there, *trust* me!"

"Well, you have a good night Joyce."

"You too Karen," and at that, Joyce placed the phone back onto the

receiver. There was a knock at the door, so Joyce peered through the windows beside it. She breathed with surprise and opened the door.

"Evening Joyce," Chief Hopper nodded courteously.

"Hey Hop...is-is something wrong?" Joyce asked, eyeing him curiously. The man had a sleep-deprived look about him, and his eyes hung with dark circles. When he didn't immediately answer, she opened the door wider. "Here, come in," she stepped aside as the tall man entered the room. She peered out at the front lawn suspiciously before shutting the door. Her fingers twisted the lock.

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: Thank you so much for reading this chapter! If you liked it make sure you Follow this story because I do plan on making it quite long and suspenseful, and maybe leave a review if you feel so inclined. I'm open to all the criticism you can give me in case I could be doing something better. I find myself *constantly* editing these first two chapters anyway for grammar and typos. Keep on writing! -  
*Nightlock*



## 2. The Waffle Burglar

### Chapter Two - The Waffle Burglar

"Have a seat...can I get you some coffee or maybe a water...?"

"Yeah..." he replied, aimlessly surveying the room. Those Christmas lights were gone, as well as the black-painted alphabet. Instead of generating mass hysteria and panic, her house now emanated an agreeable amount of peaceful vibes. It looked like any other house... but he pushed that thought from his mind because it could never be so to him. The Chief let out a heavy sigh, sinking into the couch and rubbing his eyes. With a tired hand he removed his hat and placed it onto the coffee table.

"...so, which is it?" Joyce pressed, looking more worried than before.

He looked up at her as if she'd just began speaking and asked, "Do you have any liquor?" Joyce nodded and disappeared into the kitchen. In moments she returned with two short, fat glasses and a clear bottle.

"I've only got the vodka..." she trailed off.

"That's perfect," he nodded, eyes opening and closing tiredly. He looked overly stressed; Joyce knew something was up. She prepared herself, because the last time Hopper had looked this wound up was in the fall of last year...when Will had gone missing. She poured both glasses and offered him one. He took it with a nod and sipped from the stinging alcohol, wincing as it burned his throat. Joyce's eyebrows furrowed and she merely held her glass between her knees, elbows resting on her thighs.

"What's going on Hop?" she used his nickname congenially. She wouldn't drink tonight...not as a lightweight who had to receive some potentially earth-shattering information.

Hopper carefully set the glass down on the coffee table, turning to face Joyce beside him. His eyes met hers and an old spark ignited in her stomach. The nape of her neck tickled with anticipation, but she

wouldn't force him. She couldn't do that. "Joyce," he began. "I need to know I can trust you." Her brow pinched with worry as she sampled the severity of his situation. "What I tell you now cannot leave this room..." he shook his head, leering around at the pieces of furniture. "It just can't..."

"What is it Hop?" she asked, dying from anticipation. "You know you can trust me! Think about what we've been through..." they simultaneously rekindled memories of that horrible place, blinking them away just as quickly. "I mean, I trust you!" she reached out to grasp his hand. "You *saved* Will. Jonathan trusts you with him a hell of a lot more than he ever did with Lonnie. But you have to give some of that trust back!" Hopper shook his head, his eyes glued to the floor. "Hop, look at me," she ordered, placing her glass on the table beside his. When his eyes continued to cast downwards, Joyce grabbed his shoulders and gave him a small shake, "Look at me!" She now had his undivided attention, and those piercing blue eyes burned into her dark brown ones. "You can trust me. You can trust Jonathan," she promised. Her voice took on a pleading tone, "We have *no* reason to double cross you, of *all* people. I mean, come on Hop. You *know* that!"

Hopper gently returned Joyce's hands to her knees. "Alright Joyce... alright..." he stood, slowly roaming the room. His hands rested against his hips, as if he had to concoct some sort of speech that Joyce could understand. Finally, Joyce grew tired of the thickening silence.

"Alright, listen Hop," she stood, pacing the room worriedly. This just made Hopper more nervous. "I know that when I first said all those things about the *lights* and about *Will* you didn't believe me but I was telling the *truth*!" she exclaimed pointedly. She gestured wildly to the walls, shrugging her shoulders, "I mean...I'm basically prone to believing *anything* at this point!"

"Joyce..." he tried calming her.

"So lay it on me Hop!" she demanded, standing directly before him. Despite the height difference, she had no problem staring daggers at him. He would tell her the secret; she deserved that much. "And I don't care if it means that I-"

"Joyce!" he burst in. She glared at him expectantly. "This conversation cannot leave this room..." he instructed her. "Where's Jonathan?"

"Asleep."

"Can he hear us?"

She waved a hand at this disbelievingly, "He sleeps with his headphones on." Hopper eyed the hall leading to their rooms.

"Good..." he said, rubbing a hand over his mouth. There was a thick silence until Hopper finally spoke. "I found something today...it could be a wild animal but I have reason to believe it isn't..." Joyce gave him a confused look as he pulled a folded paper bag from his coat pocket. They both returned to the couch as he emptied its contents onto the low table. It sat before her eyes, meaningless and vague.

Her eyes slowly drifted from the item back to Hopper, "Is that a half-eaten waffle?"

"Yes...an eggo..." he added. She gave him a questioning look, furrowing her brow incredulously. "Alright, alright...look at the bite mark there," he pointed.

She examined the piece of food, noting its distinctly rounded edges. "Okay...it looks, human!" she concluded, shrugging her shoulders at Hopper.

"Yeah, that's what I thought too..." Hopper continued to stare at the eggo.

"Hop, is this a burglary case? Of a...damn *waffle?!'*" her voice rose in disbelief.

"No!" he sighed in exasperation. "Okay...remember the girl?"

"What girl?!" she demanded. His blue eyes reminded her and her face changed, "*That* girl?"

"Yes!"

"Of *course* I do! How could I forget *that* girl?!" she raised her voice, a wave of emotion smashing them both.

"Since last Christmas I've been leaving food in a crate near Mirkwood," Hopper continued. "Now, I rotate it every now and then, so it stays fresh..." Joyce watched his face turn cold, devoid of emotion and starved of hope. "...but I never thought somebody would find it."

"Wait...what?!" Joyce burst out, shaking her head. "...you think...?"

"All I know is that somebody was eating this eggo and couldn't finish it," he stated. "And whoever bit this part had a relatively small jaw," he explained, pointing to the half-eaten waffle. Joyce realized that he was right; the bite mark was smaller than normal.

"So what?" Joyce prompted, gesturing wildly.

"The girl from that place...her favorite food was eggos," he stated. He watched as Joyce processed this new information. "...didn't Mike tell you?" Hopper asked. "Nancy? Maybe Will brought it up in conversation?" Joyce hastily shook her head, shrugging her shoulders in confusion. "I've left other foods there and the only thing that's ever missing are the eggos..." Joyce stared at Hopper, shaking her head sadly.

"No Hop..."

"Joyce..." he sighed, suddenly looking a little less tired. It was as if the thought of finding this girl revived him from his exhausting chase. "There could be a chance...a *chance* that she's still out there..."

"But how do you *know* it's her? And how are you sure she's even out there?" Joyce pointed out the window, "What if she's stuck in that...*place*? How are we supposed to get her back from there?!"

"I don't know!" he exclaimed. Joyce lowered her shoulders, realizing how hopeful he was. Or maybe it was desperation. "But we need to find her...or I'm gonna run out of money for waffles." With that, Hopper returned his signature wide-brimmed hat to his head determinedly. He walked towards the door, leaving Joyce alone on

the couch. "You can't tell anyone Joyce..."

"Hop..." Joyce rose from her seat. "We have to consider..." she began. At the very thought Hopper lowered his gaze to the floor. "...what if she's gone Hop? What then?"

"Then at least we'll know, alright?" he sighed, having seemingly returned to that state of fatigue. "This needs to stay between us. Don't even tell Jonathan." Each time Joyce gave him that look he lost that much more patience. But this was Joyce. *She has to know*. After a pent up sigh, he suddenly confessed, "...I don't think Benny killed himself."

Joyce was taken aback, "You mean...the man who ran the burger shop?"

"Yeah," Hopper confirmed. "...his customers all agreed that the last time they saw him there was a boy with a shaved head stealing food from his kitchen." Joyce's eyes widened as she grasped the situation. "Sound like somebody we know?" He could see Joyce was still a bit skeptical, but nearly convinced. "Benny was a good guy...he probably called the wrong people at the wrong time...he probably thought he was doing the right thing."

"You think...?" Joyce stared as Hopper simply nodded. She remembered everything. The body...Will's funeral. If they could stage Will's death, then...

"Which is why I need you to *not* talk about this," he urged, snapping her from her thoughts. "Do you understand?" Joyce nodded slowly, taking it all in. Her heart was racing and her mind was swimming with potent anxiety...it was exactly how she'd felt last November.

Hopper was halfway out the door when she raised a hand, "Wait!" He stopped, turning to face her with his tired eyes. "...how will you find out?"

"I'm gonna wait there, every night until I spot whatever's opening that crate." Joyce strongly felt that he had everything figured out, right down to the times the box gets raided. Yet he had come to her a mess and he was leaving just as altered.

"You should stay here tonight..." she offered, turning to glance at the couch. "Will's at a sleep over...you can sleep in my bed and I'll sleep in his," she suggested.

Hopper's eyebrows raised at the offer and he chuckled, "We're both adults here Joyce..." She smiled just as tiredly, and for a moment, he truthfully considered it. "I can't," he stated. "She could be out there right now," he sighed, looking down at his watch.

"...then I'll go with you."

"No, Joyce-"

"-Yes!" Joyce broke in. "What is she gonna think when she sees your car? Or...oh I don't know, your *uniform*?" He sighed. Her persistence had always been one of her most charming qualities...except during disagreements.

"Don't you have work in the morning?"

"Don't you?!" she reflected his question. He softly shook his head, sighing to himself.

"What about Jona-"

"He gets up at four to go to work, he won't notice!" Joyce argued. "Come on Hop! You bring this to me and you expect me to just *sit* here and *imagine* her out there *alone*?! While you *scare* her off with your *car* and your-"

"ALRIGHT JOYCE..." he groaned.

"God! Why do you have to *do* that?!" she exclaimed, searching about for her purse.

"Do what?" he asked, rubbing his forehead, eyes shut tight.

"Drive me crazy!" Joyce replied, eyes changing as she listened to her own words. Hopper wanted very badly to smile, but they were wasting time with this pleasant exchange.

Instead of a worded reply, Hopper adopted a smug expression and

shrugged his shoulders. This seemed to exasperate her even further as she raised a finger at him, sighing in exasperation. He stepped onto the lawn, grinning wildly; her unrelenting intensity was occasionally laughable. "Let's go then..." he opened the passenger-side door to his patrol car.

"Nope. We're taking mine," she was fumbling with her keys at the driver-side door. When they slipped from her hands Hop appeared beside her. She didn't even bend down to pick them up; just the thought of the girl being out there, surviving only off of what Hopper was leaving her had sent Joyce into an irreparably stressed state. Sure, she'd imagined this before...but back then it was much easier to simply shrug it off, assume that she was gone and swallow the sadness. Now, there was a glimmer of hope as dim as the smallest stars above her. *What if she was out there? What if Hopper was right?*

The sheriff held Joyce's keys out to her, "We have to take my car anyway..."

"Why?" Joyce prompted him, sighing as the keys were placed into her open palm.

"You said Jonathan had work in the morning," he reminded her, peering around at the otherwise empty lawn. Joyce rubbed her head in annoyance; she knew that Hop was right. Her own car was in the shop for a flat tire, and Jonathan would need this to get to work on time. "Plus...I'm technically still on duty..." Hopper brandished his lighter and lit a cigarette, balancing the rolled paper between his lips. As he slipped the lighter back into his pocket he gazed up at the deep, ravenous blue of the night sky. Joyce eyed him, took the cigarette out of his mouth and inhaled it's smoky flavor.

They remained there for a moment beneath the stars, one looking up and blowing smoke into the sky, and the other staring down, tapping her heel anxiously on the soil. Eventually, she peered up with him, handing him back the cigarette. "Don't you wish...that it could be this peaceful all the time?" she asked in a tired voice, yawning into the back of her hand.

He looked down at her, "If it were this peaceful all the time, I would be out of a job..." They both smiled, their shoulders gently moving as

they chuckled quietly to themselves.

"...what happened to us Hop?" Joyce asked the grass, gently kicking it with the toe of her shoe. A long silence - interrupted only by the humming sounds of night - passed between them. Deer grazing on the dew-laden shoots, the occasional owl hooting loudly. Crickets.

"I don't know," Hopper said. Joyce had her arms crossed, staring down into the moistened soil, gently observing the ants. He dropped the smoking butt onto the lawn, extinguishing it with his boot. He then graciously picked up the litter, slipping the damp paper into his pocket. Hopper moved to his car as Joyce slowly shook her head, eyes closing regretfully. "Let's go Joyce," he called from the wheel, turning the ignition. The patrol car hacked smoke, then growled to life as Joyce closed the door.

"Where are we going?" she asked, fishing for a map in the glove compartment.

"Mirkwood."

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: Thanks you so much for reading this chapter! Hope you're enjoying the story so far! Make sure you follow for more and leave a review if you wish! Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*



### 3. A Nunnery

#### Chapter Three - A Nunnery

Mike sat straight up in bed. He'd been woken by a noise of some kind...he thought he may have heard it in the cloud of his subconscious. His eyes adjusted to the semi-darkness of his room as he peered around at the sleeping forms. There was Lucas, stretched out on his back, his notorious camouflage bandana tied around his wrist. Dustin was snoring quietly on his stomach, drool pooling onto his pillow. Mike grinned, wishing he could take a picture. Lastly, his eyes drifted groggily to Will's sleeping bag...unzipped and empty. *He's probably just in the bathroom.* Mike remained in a leant-over position – his elbow dipping into the mattress as he held up his head – awaiting Will's return. A few minutes ticked by as he absently observed his friend's sleeping patterns, noting how frequently Lucas tossed throughout the night. Dustin slept like a log, practically immovable, yet quite tranquil...and Will still hadn't come back yet. An odd apprehension swept over Mike as he felt the need to check on him. He told himself...maybe it was just remembering last November; how easily Will had been ripped from their lives on such an unsuspecting Sunday evening. He thought it over and agreed with himself that if it were Lucas or Dustin gone for this long in the middle of night, he'd check on them too. So – as stealthily as he could manage – Mike crawled out of bed and tiptoed around his slumbering friends.

The carpet lay soft beneath his toes and a faint light glowed from beneath the bathroom door. Otherwise, it was very dark in the Wheeler's home. He didn't want to wake his friends (who were only several steps away) so he crept further down the hall and cracked open his parent's door. Two bodies tucked neatly beneath the blankets breathed gently out-of-sync. He looked back to the bathroom. *It had to be Will.* Mike softly latched his parents' door and snuck back down the hall. The sound of Will coughing violently into the sonorous surface of the sink made him freeze with apprehension. "Will?" The boy had just finished vomiting a slug into the bowl when he jumped at the voice. He hastily rinsed it down the drain and washed his face. "...Will are you okay?" Mike murmured into the

door.

Before he could move it swung open before him and Mike jumped back. "Yeah, I'm alright," Will casually lied. He'd already been missing for an entire week, and that short time alone had put his friends in great danger. The last thing he needed was for them to worry about...*whatever* was wrong with him.

"Are you sure?" Mike checked.

"Yeah! I just had...an itch in my throat," he dodged his friend's concerned gaze. Mike sensed that all Will wanted to do was go back to sleep. Mike understood the feeling...*he hated it when his throat itched!*

"Okay," Mike shrugged, walking into the bathroom. They wordlessly exchanged places as Will started towards his sleeping bag. Before he could even reach Mike's room, he heard the Wheeler's front door open and panicked feet rush inside. Will caught his breath, flinching at the sound. A slam shook the house and sent Will fervently knocking at the bathroom door.

"Mike! Somebody's in your house!" he whisper-shouted into the wood.

"What? What do you mean?" Mike's muffled voice questioned. "...it's probably Nancy!" the boy added to quell Will's nerves. Still, the ever-curious wizard couldn't help peering around the corner of the stairs. He crept down to the first landing and peeked down at the front door. Mike's house was normally cold at night, and Will's thin layered pajamas didn't help. An unwelcome chill washed over him as he waited on the first landing. "Nancy is that you?" Mike asked from the hall, his voice heavy with annoyance. At first, there was no answer... but soon she appeared at the bottom of the stairs.

"Yeah, it's me," she answered from below. Something in her voice sent Mike to the first landing. Her eyes were red and puffy and her hair hung drenched with rainwater. Will and Mike both stared at the girl, quietly surprised with how distraught she looked and wondering if it was more than the rain's fault. "It's okay Mike. You can go back to sleep," she said, nodding at them. Will dropped his gaze, peering over at Mike.

"I'll meet you up there..." Will said as he rushed back towards Mike's room. Instead of following him Mike approached his older sister, staring at her in confusion.

"...weren't you at a party?" Mike asked. Nancy nodded, grimacing with a sudden rush of sadness. As he watched her fight back tears, a deep pit formed at the base of his stomach. "What happened?" he asked, his dark eyes deepening with concern.

"It's nothing Mike...it's just, Steve..." Nancy sighed, wiping her eyes with the ball of her hand.

"...was he being mean to you?!" Mike asked, anger creeping into his voice.

"No! He's just...being a total *jackass*!" her brow furrowed in distress. For some reason, Mike remembered that one time long ago when he'd caught Steve sneaking into Nancy's window. "Sometimes...he just, says things without thinking..." Nancy sighed, removing her coat and heading to her room.

"Well, what did he say?" Mike pressed, stopping at her doorway. She turned to face him, leaning with one hand against the door. He could tell she was hesitant and it pestered him endlessly. "I thought we promised to tell each other everything! You know, 'no more secrets'?" he quoted his sister.

Nancy smiled, squinting at him playfully, "Tomorrow. I *promise*." Mike let out a huge sigh and stumbled down the hall, rolling his eyes as he went. A reflection glanced at him as he passed by a mirror. He stopped in his tracks, backing up to gaze into it. It took him back to that moment...the first time he'd called her pretty. The look on her face had been priceless. Mike let his eyelids fall shut, lowering his gaze. He was going through that cycle again...stopping at the crossroads of depression and regret. His dark eyes bore holes into his own reflection and he frowned. *It looked better with her in it...*

"Mike," Lucas called in a quiet voice. Mike simply turned his head to spot his friend standing in the doorway. Lucas shook his head, and Mike could tell he was silently saying, "Don't do this to yourself." Gazing into the mirror one last time, Mike returned to his room. Will

was awake and tucked into his sleeping bag. Lucas patted Mike's shoulder as the Dungeon Master carefully picked his footing between his friends, trying to avoid waking Dustin. They silently drifted back to sleep...except for Mike. He faced the wall and held his breath as warm tears slipped over his nose and onto the pillow.

Nancy stood, softly watching her bulletin board, her arms crossing her chest as she hugged herself. Bunches of pictures hung there; of Barb and her at the beach or in photo booths at silly school dances. She remembered how stunning Barb had looked in her dress and how many guys' jaws had dropped the moment she'd walked in. It was an understandable reaction; there was Barb – *notorious* for her blouses and mom-jeans – wearing a dress and looking *gorgeous*! Nancy chuckled, admiring how Barb could pull off both looks. Why did Steve have to make such callous comments questioning Barb's sexuality? And *in front of everyone*, proudly clutching a beer while she tore her hand from his. Barb was her *best* friend, not some girl with a crush! They had history together! Nancy glanced back up at the pictures, focusing on her friend's carefree smile through blurred vision. It'd been ages since she'd cried from being this angry. And the last time she had, Barb had been there with her...

Hopelessly, Nancy shook her head, fishing around in her drawers for some decent pajamas. Her tears dropped onto the carpet. She slipped her shirt off over her wet face and climbed out of her pants, kicking them both in the corner. After changing, she collapsed onto the bed, sighing deeply to herself and wiping her cheeks with a sleeve. Something prompted her to peer at the window and all she could imagine was Steve's face, gazing back in with reckless abandon. She turned away from it, snuggling further into her sheets and gazing softly at the lamp. Its dim light cast a warm glow over the room, coaxing her to sleep. She reminded herself that she was safe...that it couldn't catch them anymore...

She sat straight up in bed, remembering her own words to Jonathan half a year ago. "*You don't know that...*" This elicited a deep sigh and she slowly brought herself back to her own reality, laying back into the mattress and staring straight up at the ceiling. Her eyes were dry now, but her heart was raging. She had pressing matters to attend to, like plotting out what she'd say to Steve next time she saw him. Of all

things, she *couldn't* start thinking about that one week in November. Nancy rolled onto her side again, facing the comforting lamp. Her clock read twelve-thirty. Sleep was more appealing to her compared to thinking about Steve right now, but by the way Nancy's heart burned whenever his face intruded her thoughts...she knew their talk would be short.

Those blue eyes slowly shut as she drifted off to a fitful slumber, and when a dream finally came to her, she could see Jonathan there! In an alley littered with trash. And there was Steve, spray painting the windows of a nunnery passion red. *A nunnery? How did she know that was a nunnery? It looked like any old building!* They suddenly came to blows, and Nancy found herself frozen in place, merely a spectator of the battle from afar. Appropriately, she was hoping Jonathan wouldn't get too injured...and maybe knock some *sense* into Steve. But it appeared Steve had the upper hand as he viciously bashed the spray can into Jonathan's head. A flash of white and Steve was glaring her way. "Hey!" he barked. A second flash, accompanied by the sound of a camera. "Stop!" he yelled, rushing towards her. Her heart in her throat, Nancy tried yelling for Steve to stop but he reared back with his arm, ready to punch her! A third flash! Was she taking *pictures?!*

"Nancy behind you!" Jonathan yelled. Even Steve froze as he stared at the massive creature towering over her. Nancy turned to recognize the Demogorgon, flower-like mouth parted and claws already upon her. A roar split the air as she jerked back into consciousness, gasping with fright.

Sunlight was pouring through her bedroom window...she'd slept in *again!* Still trying to recover from her nightmare, she eyed the clock. Six-thirty. "Breakfast!" she could hear her mother calling from downstairs. Nancy rubbed her forehead, sighing into her wrist. She felt tired but...*more* than reluctant to go back to sleep. So she rose to her feet and started searching about for a bra. Before she left, her fingers pulled the string and the lamp went dark.

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: Thank you guys for reading this far into the story! If you liked it don't forget to follow for more chapters and maybe even

leave a review? It would be highly appreciated, and that includes criticism! Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*

## 4. Nicotine Gum

### Chapter Four – Nicotine Gum

As the Wheeler's and company sat down to a deliciously aromatic breakfast, Jonathan was opening the pharmacy. His coworker Eric and he had been busy arranging bottles of cough syrup and boxes of pills on the shelves since four. Jonathan was younger and more flexible, so he wordlessly set about stocking the lowest shelves, crouching beside Eric's leg. "Make sure you remember to check the expiration dates too. We don't want some little old lady dropping a lawsuit into our hands," Eric reminded him.

Jonathan turned one of the bottles so that the tiny black numbers were facing him, "Oh yeah..." They both chuckled to themselves.

"Yeah...that is if she can even *read* the date correctly..." Eric snickered. Jonathan shook his head, just glad that he hadn't joked about the old lady *dying* from the expired medicine. Eric watched as Jonathan placed the newest bottles behind the rest of the stack, ensuring that the oldest were pushed to the front. "You're getting the hang of this kid," he noted as Jonathan peered over his shoulder. "Didn't even need to tell you about rotating stock," he shrugged, undeniably impressed. This was Jonathan's second day on the job, but Eric sensed he was brighter than he appeared...or at least more practical than others from his age group. Before Jonathan could reply, the door opened and Eric returned to the pharmacy counter. The steely-eyed boy continued moving the bottles around when a familiar voice startled him from his work.

"Hey Jonathan," Hopper nodded his way. The considerably tall teenager stood up to greet him, shaking his hand.

"Hey Mr. Hopper," Jonathan replied. "Do you need help uh...finding anything?" he looked about at the shelves.

"No I'm alright kid, just here for a prescription," Hopper told him with a shake of his head. Jonathan nodded, turning this over in his mind. Chief Jim Hopper...he'd always struck him as a (generally) healthy guy...with maybe an occasional hankering for a cigarette. He

didn't know him enough to recall any other bad habits or illnesses... but something about him made Jonathan think of alcohol. As Hopper picked the brown paper bag from the counter, thanking Eric, they exchanged a curious glance before he passed Jonathan, exiting the store. Eric returned to his side, hands already on the shelves.

"You know that guy?" Eric asked.

"Well, sort of," Jonathan responded, watching him get into his patrol car. "He's the Chief of Police so, I kind of figured everybody knew him..."

"Yeah...word is, he's a bit of a *ladies' man*..." Eric bumped him with his shoulder, winking childishly.

"Who, *him*?" Jonathan replied, chuckling to himself. As Hopper pulled from the parking lot, the boy noticed a woman seated beside the Chief...and he *distinctly* recognized the outline of Joyce's head. She was in the car with him! Jonathan's eyes went wide with confusion. *When had she left with him today? Is this some kind of fling or is something wrong at home?!* Not only did Eric's earlier joke escalate his surprise, but he always had to take it a step further. This was before Jonathan knew Eric's *real* profession was beating a dead horse.

"*Uh-oh*, looks like he's got somebody with him now..." Jonathan eyed him glaringly. "Nice to know he spends half his time sleeping with women when he's *supposed* to be protecting the streets..." Eric remarked with a grin, his voice full of unprovoked spite. The boy shook his head, biting his lip impatiently. "You ever wonder about the kinds of women he...*attracts*?"

Jonathan stood to meet Keith at eye level, "That's my mother!"

Eric stared at him, turning pale with shock. "...*it is*?!"

"Yeah...it is," Jonathan turned on a dime and began stocking aisle three, distancing himself from his arrogant coworker. He crouched down to the bottom shelves again, hurriedly sorting the bottles. He knew he needed to get home and talk to her. This morning came back to him in flashes as he faintly remembered two glasses of unfinished liquor sitting on the coffee table. He remembered glancing absently



at the see-through bottle, capping it so Will wouldn't accidentally knock it over. How could he have *ignored* those salient clues?! The only thing he'd paid attention to was ensuring their dog was fed and let out! He glanced back to the door as it opened and watched Steve Harrington step into the pharmacy.

"I didn't know your son worked there," Hopper commented as he closed his car door. Joyce nodded, elbow propped on the window, her hand covering her mouth. "...Joyce?" She hadn't responded, and he sighed, starting the ignition. Undoubtedly she was fatigued with worry.

"...she wasn't there Hop," she shook her head, gazing out at the bushes lining the parking lot. A sick feeling plagued them both as Hopper put the car into gear.

"That doesn't mean anything. Not until we find her..." Hop tried to sound confident. As he rolled onto the main roadway, he could tell her thoughts had darkened considerably. Part of him worried it was his fault. "I'm gonna take you home Joyce..." he said, turning onto the long stretch of road leading to her street.

"No...I'll be late for work," she shook her head, glancing down at the paper bag. "Could you drop me off at the store?"

"Sure," Hopper nodded, flicking his blinker on as he turned into the parking lot. He parked the car and Joyce stepped out.

"Thanks a bunch Hop..." she said in a hollow tone, hand resting on the car door. She knew her coworkers were just inside the building, possibly watching Hop and her through the glass. But looking at this man, this gem of a man who'd risked his life for her son and was *currently* working on saving another child...she couldn't care less what people thought.

"Joyce!" he called just before the door slammed shut. She fumbled with the handle in vain – it had locked on its own – so he rolled the window down. Joyce was chuckling her apologies when he said in a genuine tone, "Thanks for coming with me."

Joyce's eyes locked with his and she finally understood. He could've

called *anyone* for backup, sparing them the top-secret details and simply referring to his search as a missing persons case. This tiny sliver of vulnerability he was showing her took Joyce aback, and she stared at him in awe. Luckily, she was able to mask most of her amazement. "Of course Hop," she replied, beaming with happiness. "Pfft...I'd go with you to hell and back!" she exclaimed as they both smiled, eyes lowering as they remembered their trip to the Upside Down. "...I mean; we've basically *been* there already..." she added comically. Their smiles were tired, reflective ones; both man and woman were grateful to have escaped with their lives, and her son. Still, a good sense of humor had to be kept concerning the whole secret operation...otherwise they'd go insane.

"I'll let you know as soon as anything comes up," he assured her. Both people seemed fully invested in this plan, hoping just as much as the other that it would come to fruition. Joyce just couldn't push the dark memories from her mind...at least not alone. Sometimes Hopper drove her absolutely *crazy*, probably raising her blood pressure. And then sometimes, he calmed her down, assuring her that everything was gonna be alright. That he was there for her...

"We should try again tonight...maybe, if we called her name?" she suggested as he fished about for a radio. She captured his gaze as he searched her eyes for any hint of hesitation. He wanted to ensure she was ready for whatever repercussions came with finding the girl. He couldn't help it, even though he knew she meant what she'd said. As their shared gaze deepened, he took in the vivacious presence of this strong, independent mother. She had her son back...and to most that would be all that matters. Still, she couldn't sit by and pretend there wasn't another lost child out there, clinging to life by a box in an unnerving forest. Whether she knew it or not, Hop idolized this woman...which is why he couldn't share his feelings with her. It was much easier to talk politics with someone who couldn't see right through you and know that something was wrong. Theirs was a connection like lava and water, mutually disarming. All he saw was fiery determination deep-rooted in warm, brown eyes. "Maybe that could work?"

"We'll try it," he declared, a newfound confidence coursing through his system. "When should I come by?"

"Nine..." she replied, holding her elbow nervously.

"...Jonathan can't know Joyce," he reminded her.

She sighed in exasperation, "Oh geez...you know, I'm not a big fan of lying to my sons Hop!"

"I'm sorry but you're gonna have to until we find her!" he exclaimed. At the sound of his own voice, Hop peered suspiciously at the cars surrounding them. "It's not safe here," his voice returned to a normal volume.

"Well what happens when we do find her Hop? What then?" Joyce prompted.

"Joyce?" Both heads turned towards the pharmacy doors. It was her manager, Donald, eyeing them questioningly. "Everything okay?" he asked, giving her an indecisive thumbs-up.

"Yeah! Just a second," she replied, returning the hand gesture. The elderly man nodded, heading inside.

"We'll figure something out. We just need to keep her hidden Joyce... they can't know."

"I know," she nodded, tapping her foot. Her hands rested on her hips. She was looking forward to her first smoke break.

"Here," he slipped his lighter into Joyce's hand. She eyed him wonderingly. It was like he knew...

"But this one's yours," she said, holding it back out to him.

"I know. My doctor says I need to quit," he stated with a small smile. "So does my secretary...you know they have nicotine chewing gum?"

"Yeah...we just got a shipment inside..." she eyed him curiously. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

"Nope!" he said, buckling his seatbelt. She could tell he was lying by that stupid smirk on his face, so she slammed the lighter onto his chest with a flat hand.

"...maybe I'll *buy* some," she declared before leaving the car. The lighter slipped down his chest and underneath his seat as he fumbled it.

"Have a nice day honey!" he called, desperately wanting to embarrass her. He could see her shaking her head as she pulled open the glass door and chuckled to himself. At least he had Joyce; someone who knew the **real** him.

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: Thanks for reading guys! I've been *very* busy as of late and couldn't upload this as quickly as I wanted to, but I felt like this exchange between Joyce and Hop *needed* to happen. As you can see, I ship them...*a lot*. Maybe even more than Mileven...*hmm...*

Anyway, follow for more chapters if you liked it and feel free to leave a review. Constructive criticism included! Don't be shy I promise I can take it. Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*

## 5. The Victim of Coincidence

Authors Note: Thanks everyone for reading the story so far! I want to personally thank those who've left reviews on this. It means ALOT for people to let me know what they think! I hope you enjoy these two chapters and sorry for the wait! Life's been *crazy* as of late.

### Chapter Five – The Victim of Coincidence

"I'm here to pick up a script," Steve said, casually chewing a stick of spear mint. Jonathan couldn't help but listen in as Eric rang him up.

"Okay, last name?"

"Harrington," Steve replied rather quickly. There was an edge to his voice and Jonathan wondered if he was upset. *Should he greet him? Or just stay hidden?* While Nancy had never revealed this information outright, Jonathan could tell her rich boyfriend had pitched in to buy him a new camera...of course, this was after he'd *broken* his last one. Still, Jonathan's mind swirled with doubt when he recalled Steve's reason for breaking it in the first place...and he couldn't blame him. After Steve had shown his true colors during their fight, Jonathan could read him like a book, and he knew that Steve probably thought their quarrel had been resolved simply through the gift. Then he remembered the monster...how Steve had been a victim of coincidence; barging into the wrong place at the wrong time. Even after Nancy ordered him out, he'd stayed...and if he hadn't...he wouldn't have saved Nancy's life. So perhaps Steve *was* a changed person. Perhaps he did harbor some redeemable qualities beneath his otherwise unchanged exterior.

"Here you go. That'll be eight dollars and fifty-nine cents," Eric announced.

"...eight dollars and fifty-nine...you gotta be kidding me," Steve dug in his pockets for missing change. "I thought this was only gonna cost me five," he wondered aloud.

"That's the price of the poison. Take it or leave it," Eric declared, furrowing his brow at the eagle-eyed teen who sighed, vigorously

searching his pockets.

"Shit..." he muttered, shaking his head. "Alright...keep it here I'll come back for it," Steve surrendered, frowning at the brown paper bag. He turned on his heels to see Jonathan approaching him from the end of the aisle.

"I got it," he walked past Steve and placed four singles onto the counter, reclaiming Eric's dwindling attention. Steve stood still, eyeing Jonathan for a second. "Well?" This was probably a bit demoralizing for a guy like Steve...but Jonathan didn't really care.

After a long moment of Steve staring at his shoes, he looked up at his peer. "Thanks man," Steve nodded, pursing his lips in an embarrassed way. As the money was passed between their hands, Steve stared at Jonathan curiously, trying to conceal the memories swarming into his immediate thoughts.

"No problem..." Jonathan nodded, half-smiling half-frowning at the slightly-taller teen. Steve took the bag from the counter, regarding Jonathan with a look he thought could resonate respect.

"You wanna catch up?" Steve finally asked.

"Sure," Jonathan nodded, following him down the aisle. Eric glared down the path, watching them disappear around the corner. His face turned a light shade of red as his ears registered the deepest parts of his fury in a dark scarlet. The two teenagers stepped into the humid spring air, Steve casually leaning backwards against the wall as Jonathan stood a little awkwardly beside him. Their hair swayed gently in the wind...well, Jonathan's did. Steve's was - as always - coiffed to perfection.

"So how's your mom?" Steve asked, blindly tossing his gum to the right. Jonathan's eyebrows raised inadvertently. This day was just *full* of surprises; he was holding a decent conversation with Steve and it didn't feel forced or withdrawn. He didn't feel intimidated or threatened, and Steve had just asked how his mom was!

"She's better...it's a lot easier on her, on us. With Will back," Jonathan explained.

"I bet," Steve noted. "How is he doing?"

"...Will?" Steve nodded. "He's...alive. And well..." Jonathan squinted his eyes at the Indiana sunshine. "...he's really happy."

"That's good..." Steve nodded, fishing in the bag for the pill bottle. He carefully studied the label, then dropped it back into the bag. Now Jonathan was curious.

"...are you sick?" Jonathan asked. If he was, his body had a good way of hiding it. The teen appeared to be in perfect health.

"Oh...no..." he waved a hand at Jonathan. "It's not that..."

"Pain?" he asked.

"It's not for me," Steven stated in a declarative tone. "Can we talk about something else?"

"Yeah! Sorry..." Jonathan scratched the back of his head. "Uh...how's things with you and Nancy?" Steve blew a deep sigh through slightly parted lips, shaking his head. "...wrong question?"

"Yeah..." Steve nodded, peering down at the pavement.

"Jonathan, break's over. Get back to work," Eric ordered. Steve eyed the man glaringly as he slipped back inside the sliding doors.

"Is that your boss?" he asked, grinning.

"No...just my coworker," Jonathan sighed.

"...then screw him," Steve casually remarked.

"He's right though, I should really get back..." Jonathan sighed, backtracking towards the sliding doors. He wished he could wholeheartedly agree with his hot-headed peer, but he didn't want to risk losing his job.

"Yeah alright," Steve nodded, glancing over at his car. "Maybe I'll see you around, Byers," he grinned, trying to tap into those bad memories and brighten them a bit.

"Yeah, sure," Jonathan nodded his way. He watched Steve traipse off to his garnet BMW, noting it's sleek, modern design. As Steve reversed the car and drove out of the parking lot, Jonathan glanced at his *own* vehicle: a rough-looking, twelve-year-old Ford LTD. Re-entering the store, he gazed up at the clock. It was nearly noon, so Jonathan returned to an aisle, placing various merchandise onto the shelves with haste. He was fortunate enough to be capable of multi-tasking – his job quite mundane as it was – and he thought about his mother and the Chief. The teen grew pensive as he set the last item from the box down a bit harsher than intended, continuing onto the fifth aisle. His stomach growled and he regretted skipping breakfast in the morning, sighing to himself. Of *all* the things he was now fretting over, breakfast shouldn't be one of them. He swore to himself that tomorrow, he'd eat something before he left. It seemed silly...to be in such a rush that he denied himself a moment to eat, especially when he knew there were starving children out there with nothing...

At the Wheelers' home, Nancy and Mike spent their lazy afternoon in the living room; Nancy on the couch – elbow propped on the back of the sofa – and Mike, kneeling beside the television, flipping through the channels. Mike huffed in annoyance. "Sunday television *sucks*," he noted, surrendering to the weather channel. He joined Nancy on the cushions, stretching out unashamedly. His bare feet grazed Nancy's thigh and she cringed.

"Ew! Mike if you're gonna do that put your feet down there..." she shoved his calves, grimacing.

"What?" he asked, nudging her obnoxiously with his big toe. Both of them were laughing until Nancy actually slapped his foot. "Ow!"

"MIKE STOP you **know** I hate feet! *Especially* yours!" she leaned away from him, collecting herself.

"Okay okay..." Mike sighed, switching position so his head was closest to his sister. She playfully shoved him and he head-butted her as they overheard the weekly forecast...

"...now I know everyone's probably getting sick of the rain right now but unfortunately there's more to come this week. We expect to see *lots* of showers beginning in the late evening and continuing on



through Thursday..." the meteorologist pointed at a map with red and blue curves. Each curve had an odd arrangement of half-circles and triangles sticking off their edges.

"How do you think they know all of that?" Nancy asked, her voice full of curiosity.

"Well...sometimes they're wrong...there's only so much they can predict," Mike began, stopping to peer up at her from the sofa. "Wait, you expect *me* to know how they tell the weather?"

"Well you *are* the nerd of the family," she teased, grinning down at him. He snickered back, able to see straight up her nose and under her chin; he'd finally found her worst angle.

"Don't worry! You're not too far off," Mike reminded her.

"Okay...did you *see* my last report card?" she rolled her eyes, shaking her head disbelievingly.

"Nope! I was too busy showing mine to Mom and Dad," he boasted, earning a second shove from the teenager. "What?! It's not my fault *Steve's* such a bad studying partner!" he exclaimed, grinning wildly. Her smile vanished, and she returned her gaze to the aging meteorologist. She saw how there was going to be a storm this week along with some possible flooding. *Great...* she thought to herself. Mike sat up, remembering last night and he mentally berated himself. He'd crossed a line, he knew it. "Oh...sorry," he apologized, noticing her subdued anger.

"...for what?" she asked.

"For bringing him up..." he replied. She turned away again, this time eyeing the carpet. A short silence, then, "Hey, um...you never told me what he said last night."

It took a moment for her to remember, then she rolled her eyes. "It was just really stupid of him. He was..." she sighed, shaking her head. "...he was trying to be funny but he just sounded *stupid* and mean..."

"Oh..." Mike scratched the back of his head. "Well...I do that sometimes..."

"No...Mike. You would *never* say what he said..." she eyed him sternly. "...not on your worst day."

The suspense was killing him, "Okay, now you *have* to tell me." He was flattered she thought that highly of him, but what had Steve said to make his usually well-tempered sister *this* distraught? By the pitted feeling in his gut, Mike sensed it was something bad.

"Mike..." she shook her head. "I'm fine. It's over and I'm over it. I know it was stupid..." she sighed, meeting his stare. "I don't want to repeat it." She kept her eyes aimed directly at him and the message was clear.

"...fine..." Mike groaned, laying back into the couch. His smooth, wavy hair barely grazed the outer part of her thigh and she playfully tousled it.

"Don't worry..." she reassured him as he waved her intruding hands away. "I won't let him hurt me like that again..."

She could feel Mike turning to peer up at her. "Good. You shouldn't."

"I won't..." she repeated, sorting through her mind for something to switch conversation topics. "So...where are all your friends?"

"Oh. They went home," Mike stated in a bored tone. "Will said he wasn't feeling good..."

"Weren't you guys supposed to work on a project or...something like that for-"

"Mr. Clarke's class, yeah! Will's my partner and Dustin is Lucas'. Will told me not to worry though...he said he might not be able to go to school tomorrow. So we'd just present on Tuesday," Mike explained the simple intricacies of middle school. Nancy sometimes wished she was still there...AND then she didn't.

"Won't the teacher take points off every day he's absent?" she asked. Mike shook his head wondrously and Nancy eyed him in awe. Her teachers would *never* go easy on her like that. "You guys are lucky. That'll change once you get into ninth grade..."

"It will?" Mike asked. His sister nodded, eyeing the television screen confidently. Mike hummed curiously to himself, then asked, "So are you gonna break up with Steve now...or...?"

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: Thanks for reading chapter five! Follow for more and leave a review if you feel so inclined. Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*

## 6. Nerd Fight

### Chapter Six – Nerd Fight

"Mike! I'm *not* talking about this," she burst out, rapidly blinking her eyes.

"What?! I just wanna know in case he actually uses the door to come visit you next time!" She eyed him accusingly. *Had Mike seen Steve when he...?*

"Why, so you can turn him away?!" she retorted.

Mike pretended to ponder this for a moment. "Sounds fair to me. He hurt you!" Mike declared. Nancy shook her head, rising from the couch and striding across the room to plop into the La-Z Boy. Mike glared at her impatiently as she stared at the sleep-inducing broadcast. He refused to watch it (it had already bored him to tears). "Hey!" he barked. She didn't answer. Mike sighed heavily. She was doing that *thing* again; staring at an object, ignoring all conversation directed at her whatsoever. It irked him beyond belief. Just because she was older didn't mean she could magically turn her ears off! "Look, I'm just saying! If somebody messed with me like that-

"Mike you don't even know!" she exclaimed, ears red with anger. "It was about Barb, okay?! He said something about Barb and I *wasn't* ready for it!"

"That's not your fault! It's his! He shouldn't have said anything!"

"You don't understand! What if one of your friends said something mean about Eleven?" she pressed.

"They have!" Mike shot back, his ears warming up as well. How dare she bring her up. El had *nothing* to do with this, plus, Steve wasn't worth comparing to his old friend. Selfless, honest Eleven...to Mike, no one could compare. They glared at each other from across the room, clutching their respective seats in frustration.

"...who?" Nancy finally broke the glaring contest.

Mike sighed. "Lucas. He didn't trust her at first...he called her all these names and said she was a traitor," he explained, softening his grip on the cushions. "But then she saved us...*twice*." He remembered the feel of the night air on his skin as he stepped outside of the school, watching in horror as armored trucks and men with guns approached the building; how the icy claws on his spine registered his immediate fears before his brain had. If he had known that had been the beginning of a goodbye, he would've acted *much* differently. But Lucas had valiantly raced to El's defense – albeit with an ineffective slingshot – during their final moments together. Lucas had definitely forgiven her, otherwise he wouldn't have sacrificed himself like that. In all his reminiscing, Mike had gazed down at the sofa in contemplation.

"I never knew..." Nancy confessed. "I assumed you all just, immediately trusted her." Mike shook his head dismissively as Nancy chuckled. "I *still* can't believe she was here and we *never* noticed!"

Distracted from his deep thoughts, Mike grinned at this, "Yeah...we had some close calls..."

"Like when?" Nancy held her head in the cup of her hand, watching her brother admiringly.

"Well...there was this one time when she came downstairs during dinner. She walked *right behind* Mom and *nobody* saw her except for us!" Mike giggled to himself as Nancy peered at the landing behind her. "Dustin had to slam the table..." he trailed off, unable to speak due to his uncontrollable laughter.

"You mean, right there?" she pointed to the bottom of the stairs, trying to picture her standing there with them. Mike nodded, still gasping for air as Nancy joined his infectious laughter. For Mike it was easy...he could remember her face *perfectly*. And laughing about their time spent together was a clever way to quell his unimaginable pain...because even now, after several months, her memory occasionally *tore* across his chest in painful swipes.

"Good to see you two are getting along," Ted remarked as he entered the room.

"Hey Dad," they greeted him as he tapped Nancy's shoulder. She let her father sit in his designated chair, joining Mike back on the sofa. The middle-aged man smiled behind his wide-rimmed glasses.

"How's the weather look this week?" he gazed at the reporter while the words, "Breaking News" sat boldly beneath her.

"Rain...lots of rain," Nancy replied, watching the dark-haired woman as she continued her description of the scene.

"...there seems to be a bit of a mix-up concerning what caused this *giant* to topple over, completely blocking the street. According to our weather history, there were no winds strong enough to knock this single tree over without disrupting the rest of the forest here on Randolph Lane..." The name alone perked his ears as Mike tuned into channel five. He knew that was the street that bordered Hawkins Lab...*that* was Mirkwood. Ted lounged idly by, browsing the comics section of the newspaper. "As you can see, the roots of the tree are still intact," she pointed to them like toes on a foot. "...and along with blocking the street, it seems to have demolished this fencing to our left." The barbed-wire fence dipped like a trough at the very mass of the plant. In the background, Mike and Nancy spotted the enormous satellite dishes proudly sitting atop Hawkins National Laboratory. They exchanged a wondering glance. "We have a few of the workers here to speak on behalf of Hawkins Department of Energy." At this point in the broadcast, Ted rose to his feet and wandered into the kitchen. Mike's mouth hung agape as that gray hair, those dark eyes and that deceiving smile appeared on screen. His hands cupping her face in a false embrace...he remembered it all. To Nancy, he was a stranger, but she knew he was connected to them in some way, and to Mike's sickening realization, the Bad Man was alive...and well.

"Yes...it is quite a shame something of this sort happened. We build these fences to keep animals and petty thieves out, so as not to disrupt our work. Our research costs *quite* a bit of money and minor setbacks – like the cost of repairing a fence – could mean major economic setbacks in the long run..." he explained, occasionally gazing into the camera lens and out at the two children. With every wandering glance, Mike grew that much more sick to his stomach.

"According to the adviser of this outpost, Dr. Martin Brenner, this

fence will be fixed in only a couple of hours thanks to their tireless staff. I'm Grace Winters, back to you Dave." Nancy eyed her brother as he seethed with fury. Now Mike knew his name. He wouldn't forget it anytime soon.

Ted appeared in the doorway of the living room, Holly trailing his side. Both of them took notice of Mike and Nancy's horrified expressions. "What'd I miss?" he asked. Mike tore from the couch, bolting into the basement as a fretful Nancy followed. Ted was baffled, "Huh..." He peered down at his youngest, "...guess it's just you and me!" Holly stared back up at him, her blue eyes wide and curious. Ted gently sat her on the couch, walking up to the television and switching the cartoons on for the toddler. He returned to his La-Z Boy, peacefully oblivious of the panic that was unfolding below.

Hopper stared at the small screen, sitting behind someone's desk and trying to sort through his swarming thoughts. *Dr. Martin Brenner was...alive.* This certainly changed things. He couldn't wrap his mind around the toppled tree...but there was something unnatural about the fall. "Hey Flo...do we have any training classes tonight?" His secretary eyed him curiously.

"Were you planning on actually *attending* these ones?" her eyebrows raised behind large brown spectacles.

"No, of course not," he casually joked. "Just wondering..." Rolling her eyes knowingly, Florence crossed the office to eye the bulletin board. Hopper inwardly chuckled at her nonchalance.

"Looks like you're in the clear. Nothing scheduled tonight," she announced.

"Thanks a million Flo," Hopper yawned, flipping through the piles of paperwork he still had to go through.

"Mm-hm..." she hummed, returning to the window. He blew out a deep sigh, piling the papers as neatly as he could and rising from his seat. "Something the matter Hop?"

"No...no everything's good," he replied, picking his coat from a hook. He put his hat on, digging in his pocket for another stick of gum.

Florence smiled knowingly at this tiny action, watching him chew another piece. It was nice to know he'd listened.

"You planning on seeing somebody tonight Chief?" Officer Callahan asked, smirking to his partner. They were playing cards; having washed their cars and filled their quotas, there was nothing else to do for officers in a quiet town.

"Yeah...your mother called me last minute. Thought I should let you know," Hop casually stated, squinting and pointing reminiscently at Callahan. With that, he exited the office, opening his car door and climbing in. Callahan's smile vanished as Powell snickered, slapping an ace onto the pile of cards.

"You walked right into that one," Powell laughed, looking back at Flo. Even as she set about her work, she couldn't fight the smile that crept across her face. The secretary watched as Chief Jim Hopper drove off in his patrol car, wondering where he was headed...

...but not caring too much at the same time.

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: Thanks for reading everyone! I wanted to upload this WAY earlier than I did but you know what they say: you can't rush creativity...or, something like that. Follow for more and leave a review, constructive criticism is *invited*. Thanks again! Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*



## 7. A Songbird

### Chapter Seven – A Songbird

He could hear the Ford pulling into the driveway, those tires crushing the dry grass. The sun balanced itself over the horizon as Jonathan slammed the car door, striding onto the porch and fumbling with his keys. He tried the knob and to his surprise their front door was already unlocked...and unlatched. The teenager tentatively pushed it open, letting it swing into the open air of their living room. Unsure of what to do or how to act, he crept silently into the house. A slight breeze caused the door to shriek on its hinges, and Jonathan grimaced. He had to check; the silence was slowly causing him to panic. "...Will? Are you home?" he called into the drafty house. There was no answer for a moment, and Jonathan began doubting his previous decision. He stepped lightly into the kitchen, eyes darting everywhere; on the counters, under the table, around the corners, to the curly wires of the telephone. Each hair on the teen's body stood at full attention as he entered the hallway. For a moment, he froze at what he saw. Someone lying face down in front of his brother's room. It took mere seconds for him to process that it was Will. The back of his jacket was colored a near black with mud and grass stains. His shoes were clogged with dirt, but only behind the heels. Instead of gasping, Jonathan held his breath and walked over, crouching down to his brother. "Will?" his hands gently shook him and his voice cracked in shock. "*Hey Will!*" To his enormous relief the boy's eyes drifted open and he peered up at him curiously.

"Jonathan?" he asked, looking more than a little confused. His older brother sat him up against a wall and at first he had to hold Will's head up. It was as if the muscles in his neck had turned to jelly, but eventually Will regained control and began gazing about the hall wonderingly.

"Will!" he sighed in relief. *This was not last November*, he told himself. *Will is right here.* "Why are you in the hall Will?"

The boy turned to eye the spot he'd fallen into, "I was in the hall?"

"Yeah! We still are. That's where I found you," Jonathan pressed the

back of his palm to Will's forehead and he felt cold...*ice* cold. "You're freezing!" the eldest grasped Will's hands to find that they too were chilled. "How do you feel?"

"Sick..." Will answered honestly. He continued to gaze around them as if it were the first time he'd seen his childhood home.

"Hey Will? I need you to listen to me alright?" Jonathan pressed for his attention. "What day is it?" Eric was a part-time EMT, and before today he'd shared stories with him about how they ruled out the need to take patients to the emergency room. While Jonathan desperately wanted help in this moment, he felt he should wait until Joyce returned before making any decisions concerning hospitals. He could care less about the cost...even though Joyce and he were still paying off their last visit. It didn't matter to Jonathan.

"Um...it's Sunday..." Will eyed him a little skeptically.

"What year?"

"Nineteen eighty-four," Will replied with ease.

"Who's the President?" Jonathan asked.

"Oh come on..." Will smiled tiredly. "That's not fair..."

"Will just *try* and remember his name. I know you know what he looks like..."

"Yeah...the funny guy that Mom really likes," Will remembered.

"What's his last name?" he pressed.

"...I think it's, Ronald..." Will wondered out loud. He raised a hand to his mouth and violently coughed into it.

Jonathan sighed, smiling a bit with relief, "...close enough, good job buddy. Just one more question, okay?" Will nodded, wiping his mouth. "What's the last thing you remember?"

Will dug back into his memory, closing his eyes every now and then to block out the present distractions. His brother's worried expression

*did not* help with this. "I remember...biking back from Mike's house... riding along Mirkwood, by the fence..." Jonathan's breath went shallow as he listened in. Will slammed his eyes shut, feeling the sensation of the wind on his face and the subtle strain in his legs. The sun had been directly above him, so he figured it must've been around noon. He remembered the *thunderous* sound and the *shrieking* of the wire fence. The ground trembled and he was *pitched* from his bike onto the pavement. As he collected himself, he remembered looking back and seeing... "A tree..." he opened his eyes. "I remember a tree fell down right behind me...on Mirkwood."

"A *tree*?" Jonathan checked. He had to dig his brain to remember which street his brother's friends had so famously nicknamed...he was sure it was on Cornwallis and Kerley.

Will nodded, "It made me fall off my bike...and I think I hit my head..." Jonathan froze at his last words with shock. *He could have a neck injury and I moved him!?* He raised a gentle, curious hand to all parts of his brother's cranium, exploring the soft, chestnut hair. When Will winced in pain he shifted around his brother to kneel before the spot behind his right ear. There was a sizable bump there, but no blood.

"Why don't you guys ever wear helmets?!" Jonathan sighed in exasperation, gingerly prodding the bump.

"They look so ugly...and we already get picked on enough at school," Will explained, wincing at Jonathan's probing fingers.

"You're lucky you didn't die!" he informed his little brother, returning to crouch before him. "What else do you remember?"

"...oh! And then I woke up here," he stated simply. At first Will hadn't registered the trouble with that timeline.

"...no, Will," Jonathan sighed as his brother began noticing the story's pitfall. "I mean...how did you get *here*, in the hallway?"

Will tried to remember, he tried so hard he thought his brain would start hurting. But it was a really good question for someone else to answer. "...I don't know..." Will announced, an odd vulnerability

creeping into his voice. He eyed his brother fearfully. Jonathan was gazing in his brother's hazel eyes, his face set in stern contemplation.

"Okay well...do you think you can walk to your bed?" Jonathan asked, his mind juggling each frightening possibility. Will nodded, slowly sliding up the wall and onto his feet. Jonathan led him into his room, helping him onto his mattress. Jonathan eyed the clock, noting that it was five-thirty. "Mom's gonna be home soon, so don't worry. She'll know what to do..." It sounded like he was reciting this more for himself than for Will.

"It's okay Jonathan...you knew what to do," he consoled him, smiling up at his brother as he tucked him in. "You didn't freak out *nearly* as much as Mom would have..." he joked. Will's ability to remain optimistic and even funny in situations like these continually astounded Jonathan and he laughed along with his little brother.

"You know, I think you're right," Jonathan agreed, chuckling to himself.

"They don't call me Will the Wise for-" his own sentence was cut off with a fit of *violent* coughing. Jonathan's expression grew stern and solemn as he realized how sick Will was.

"Let me get you a water," he tapped Will's arm, waiting for the boy to nod. Jonathan rushed into the kitchen, returning with a lidded cup of water with a straw poking through a hole in the top.

"Thanks..." Will croaked. "Last ti-me...it spi-illed," he stammered, his voice broken and hazy. Will's breathing had become labored since the beginning of this, and Jonathan thought it would have eased up by now. It had only gotten worse.

"Okay...okay..." Jonathan paced about the room as Will sipped his water. This elicited another bout of hacking as Jonathan stared from the doorway, helpless. His mounting panic sent him into heavy breathing of his own. "I'm gonna call Mom, I'll be right back. If you need me just yell!" Jonathan snatched the phone from the receiver and began dialing. He read the numbers from a tiny paper taped onto the wall, trying to stop his hyperventilating. He finished dialing the last digits for "Joyce's Work," tapping his foot as the tone hummed

into his ear. Will's coughs bounced throughout the house and a breeze made Jonathan shiver with fright. The last rays of sunlight poured into the living room and momentarily confused the teenager. Then he sighed in frustration; he'd left the door wide open! Letting the phone dangle by its noose, he crossed the room and pushed it shut. By the time he returned the store operator had hung up since there was no reply. Jonathan cursed loudly, his face contorting angrily as he re-dialed the same number.

"Hello this is Hawkins-"

"I NEED JOYCE BYERS! Can you put Joyce on the phone?!" Jonathan shouted, desperately trying to collect himself. Will chuckled a bit to himself at how short Jonathan's fuse had burned. Then, another series of painful coughs doubled him over and he curled into his comforter. Each burst of air scratched at something in his throat, scalding him like boiling water. The cup tempted him, but he didn't want to drown himself. His esophagus begged for water, feeling as dry as the sands of a desert. Still, each tiny sip nearly choked him. He heard his brother on the phone in the hall, "What?!" A pause as the voice on the other line spoke. "She's gone already?" Will had found a way to breath most comfortably and without causing more coughing fits...but it sounded rancorous and horrible. His limbs buzzed with exhaustion, even though he wasn't moving. Will thought about getting up to show Jonathan that he was okay and that he didn't have to worry...but he didn't have the energy to move *anything*! In mere minutes, the once bright-eyed, sprightly youth had been reduced to a wheezing invalid. Luckily Jonathan returned, sitting on the edge of Will's bed. He noted his brother's odd position, "Are you cold?" Will nodded meagerly, so Jonathan left the room to fetch a thicker blanket. Will shivered, blinking slower and longer, shutting his eyes one last time...

When they finally re-opened his lights were out. His bed was swarming with grime and scum and some kind of moldy moss. The sunlight that had been throwing shadows across his room now cast a foreboding blue hue over everything that wasn't pitch black. Each wall hung with vines and great masses of decaying plants, dripping like rotten tomatoes. His mattress felt twenty degrees cooler and he thought he could feel himself sinking into it. Everything was moist

and it disgusted him. Will's eyes filled with tears as he held himself closer, trembling at the slightest noise and fidgeting at the faraway sound of Jonathan's voice.

"WILL!" he was practically *yelling* into his brother's ear, and he still hadn't woken. He shook him forcefully, shouting his name over and over. If they had neighbors, they would've raised their heads in absentminded wonder at the noise Jonathan was making. "WILL! WAKE UP!"

Will tried to speak - tried to inhale and exhale properly and respond to his brother - but his energy had entirely deserted him. The atmosphere was heavy with dust and particles from some kind of pollinating plant. If anything, he *had* to get out. He couldn't stay here, not again. His breath fell dangerously shallow. Will was certain he would perish if he remained a moment longer, so he clamped his eyes shut and thought of home. It wasn't like trying to put Reagan's name with his face, or whether blue was complimentary to green or red. His mother's eyes and her comforting voice came back to him in echoes; Jonathan's camera; their dog; his friends and their radios... they all reminded him of where he belonged. Not here, in this musty place of bacteria and squelching and horrible smells and filthy air. There was something else too...something loud, honest and demanding. He hummed it to himself in his darkest moments...and it was like he could hear it on the wind, carried to him by some unseen songbird.

His finger practically smashed the play button as the boombox hummed to life. Jonathan positioned the speakers towards Will as a catchy guitar tune warmed his blood. He upped the volume and fixed the balance so it shook his very eardrums; The Clash began singing those first few lyrics. Their usually quiet house roared to life as the song filled every nook and cranny with rock and roll. The Clash was *everywhere*, and Jonathan hoped that Will could somehow hear it in the depths of his subconscious. The comforting chords and sounds certainly curbed his own anxiety quite a bit. He returned to Will's side, a hand gripping his shoulder. "Will! Wake up!"

"There's a storm coming," were the first words from Hopper's mouth after Joyce closed the car door.

She eyed him surprisingly, "Oh...well, that explains why that place was so *busy* today!" Joyce sighed, removing her outer work vest as Hopper drove down the road. "Everybody wants to get their food before the weather gets bad..."

"Yep..." he nodded, turning onto Cornwallis. Joyce eyed him suspiciously. Before she could ask, he spoke, "A tree fell and crushed a section of the fence surrounding the lab. It's completely blocking Mirkwood."

Joyce looked around for a street sign to get her bearings, "How'd it fall?"

"That's what I was wondering..." Hopper stated, pointing up ahead to the junction of Cornwallis and Kerley. "Up there...you see it?" He slowed the car down and shut off the headlights, stopping beside the road.

"Yeah..." Joyce nodded, squinting ahead in the fading twilight.

"News reporter says they're gonna have crews working to fix the fence," Hopper informed a fretful Joyce. He sighed, watching her shake her head and rub the bridge of her nose. Hopper hated seeing her like this, and he despised even more that his words were causing her distress. But she *had* to know. "He's alive."

She turned sharply to eye him. "Who?"

"Dr. Brenner. He was on the news...talking to the reporter," he sighed, removing his hat to scratch his head. "He could be trying to keep up appearances but...it's *very* unlikely," he added. "Think about it: when's the last time *anyone* from the Department of Energy was on the news to talk about *anything*?"

"Did he...did he talk about their research?" Joyce pried in an almost hopeful tone.

"No...he was whining about the damages..." Hopper sighed. "But still...they could find her before *we* do."

Joyce shook her head. She'd JUST gotten off work. It seemed her job as a mother of two never ended...but this wasn't even her child they

were talking about. Yet she'd still left such an impression on the two adults that neither could deny their responsibility for her. Neither could forget what she'd done... "We shouldn't be thinking like that..." she sighed.

"It's something we *have* to think about," Hopper rebuked her statement. They sat, staring down one another in the thickening darkness. Never did they stop to wonder if anything was to come of these staring contests; they both just happened to like proving a point. They'd also grown quite accustomed to the lines and angles that composed each other's face...and to them, it felt like home. Even if they were *furious* with each other, at least they could be angry together. After a long silence, Hopper continued, "Here's what we're gonna do..." Joyce lowered her gaze, listening attentively. "We're gonna check the box, see if it's been picked clean yet..."

"You haven't checked it today?!" she burst in, exasperated with him. "Are you *insane*?! You wanna check the box **now** while men from the state are *lurking* all over the *street*?!"

"JOYCE!" he exclaimed, gripping her shoulders. She furrowed her brow at him questioningly. *What was he thinking?!* He stressed each word, clearly enunciating them, "I have a plan. Please bear with me..."

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: Thanks for reading! Follow for more to come and leave a review if you wish. Keep on writing! -Nightlock



## 8. The Call

### Chapter Eight – The Call

"...should I stay or should I go now?" Will hummed it to himself in the mire, clutching his torso for support. Since the song had started playing, his breath had returned to him, but he remained feeble-bodied in the wake of his favorite music. It seemed so real, as if it were actually playing just outside his house; still, he knew if he were able to get up and look for it, it wouldn't be there. Sometimes it overlapped itself, replaying certain verses Will was especially fond of. His mind thickened whenever this happened, and he fought hard to stay awake. He already knew that falling asleep *here* meant never-ending nightmares. "...darlin' you got to let me know..." he exhaled, shivering life into his extremities. There was nothing for him here... no family, no light, no warmth and no happiness. He blinked again and again as he tried to keep his mind focused on home. There has to be a light at the end of this tunnel that's not a train, he thought. Will began slowly rocking himself on his side, quietly humming the song. He kept his eyes clamped shut, focusing on Jonathan, whose presence had never entirely deserted him. Will had found a way to cling to it through the music.

"Come on Will..." Jonathan grasped his cold hands, rubbing them between his own in a desperate attempt to wake him. He rubbed a palm against the boy's sternum a little harshly, trying to receive some signal or connection. As long as he could hear Will's labored wheezing, Jonathan knew he would remain – mostly – calm. Suddenly, Will's eyes snapped open and he coughed into his mattress. Jonathan kept a steady hand on his back, his eyebrows knit together at the bridge. "Will!" Jonathan tried yelling over the music to no avail. He leaned across the gap and lowered the volume. Will met his worried eyes as his brother leant over him protectively. "Are you okay?" Jonathan asked.

Will honestly didn't know the answer anymore. He knew he felt safer, now that he was back...but there was a sickness about him, inside of him. It was like when Jonathan's car needed to have its oil changed... that's what he felt like. "I think so..." he breathed. His lungs felt

heavy with cobwebs as he carefully inhaled the clean, fresh air of his bedroom.

"Okay..." Jonathan was about to reach for the water, but thought again. "Do you want a drink?" Will hastily shook his head, breathing deeply. "Okay...I wasn't sure if you did or not..." Jonathan nervously shifted about on Will's bed, unable to find a comfortable sitting position. "Mom should be home any minute..." Jonathan peered out at the dwindling sunlight barely scaling the treetops. Who was he kidding, she should've been home *many* minutes ago. "I'm gonna go make dinner, okay?" Jonathan was asking if it was okay to leave him. Will nodded, smiling at his caring brother. "Okay..." Jonathan stood, searching the room for something. He found a handheld noisemaker and slipped it into Will's hand. "If you need me, but you can't call me, use this," he folded Will's fingers around the object.

"Okay..." Will agreed, his voice barely above a whisper. Jonathan nodded, tapping his hand confidently and moving into the kitchen. As the clatter of dishes reached him, he eyed his supercomm, wishing he could radio his friends and tell them about his nightmarish experience...

"Hey Lucas! I need to tell you something *right now*. It's REALLY important. Over," Mike finished. Nancy watched as he eagerly awaited a reply, holding the supercomm close to his face.

"Yeah Mike? What is it?" Lucas replied. When Mike didn't answer, he sighed into the comm and added, "Over." Nancy rolled her eyes.

"Okay! Remember the Bad Man? The tall scientist who tried to take Eleven from us? Over?"

Lucas was more than puzzled, "Uh...yeah. Why? Over."

"I saw him on the news Lucas...he's *alive*. Over," Mike specified, a worried look crossing both their faces.

"What? No way! The Demogorgon...it *must've* gotten him!" Lucas thought back to those heart-stopping moments. "...over!"

Mike sighed, then pressed his finger to the supercomm, "I thought it

did too...over." There was a short silence.

"What do you think this means?" Nancy asked. Mike abruptly shushed her and she glared blue daggers at him. He eagerly awaited Lucas' response.

"How do you think he survived?" Lucas asked. "Over."

"I don't know...but he kept looking into the camera. Like he *knew* we were watching him...over," Mike mulled over this bitterly.

"Sounds creepy...I wish El would've used her powers to kill him instead...over," Lucas sighed.

"What?!" Nancy stared, mouth hanging open in shock. "She can-"

"SHH!" Mike hissed, glaring at his sister. She glared back angrily, but stayed quiet. "Lucas...I know it's late, but do you think you can tell Dustin? I want him to know, just in case anything happens..." Lucas waited for Mike to finish. "I don't want him to be surprised...over."

"Okay...I'll radio him right now...over and out."

"Thanks Lucas," Mike smiled into the radio. "Over and out." He retracted his antenna as Nancy stared at him in shock. "What?" he shrugged.

"El can *kill* people?!" Nancy demanded.

"Yeah. I thought you knew..." he trailed off.

"NO ONE TOLD ME THAT," she exclaimed, shaking her head.

"She did it to save us!" Mike assured her. "They were bad people *and* they had guns..." he added, nestling his supercomm back into the bundle of blankets.

"They had *guns* pointed at you?" Nancy repeated dumbfounded.

Mike nodded, "I guess I never told you about that part..." Nancy stared at her little brother in astonishment. Grown men with guns... pointing them at a bunch of twelve-year-olds...she couldn't imagine.

"But hey! That's nothing compared to what you and Jonathan did!" He regained her attention. "You actually *fought* the Demogorgon!" he reminded her, his voice full of awe.

"Yeah..." she rolled her eyes. "Jonathan did most of the planning... and Steve was there too! I mean, if it weren't for Steve, we..." Mike waited for her to finish, but she simply remained quiet, reconsidering everything in her mind.

"...I guess that's why it's so hard for you to just dump him, huh?" Mike asked with a chuckle.

Nancy nodded, "Yeah. Even though he's a total *jackass*...he was still there..." She snapped from her reveries, "So what are you gonna do about this Brenner guy?" she asked.

Mike's eyes lowered to the ground in thought. He hated that man more than he hated Troy and James; when *he* was mean he wasn't upfront about it like *they* were. Brenner connived and manipulated people to get what he wanted...mostly Eleven. He turned to eye the blanket fort and said, "I'll wait...just like I have been doing." There was not much else he *could* do. Nancy lowered her gaze. She didn't have the heart to suggest any different course of action, but she didn't need to know Mike very well to see that his faith was dwindling. His heart burned with an indescribable sadness. There were times when he considered her death...but he couldn't simply *believe* something because everyone else believed it. This was *Eleven*. He wouldn't close this door. Not until he knew the truth. It was the not-knowing that made his grief burn that much hotter.

"A-are you sure about this Hop?" Joyce whispered to the stocky man.

"I'm sure Joyce. I need you to do exactly as we discussed once I break the tree line," he reminded her.

"Okay, I *never* agreed to that plan by the way!" she cut in, trying to reach for his arm. "Hop, you *can't* just go out there like that!"

"You got a better idea Joyce?" he whisper-yelled the question. They stopped in their tracks, crunching the leaves beneath their feet to stare at each other.

"Yes! We wait until tomorrow! You know, when there *aren't* men from the lab yards away from here," Joyce exclaimed in a hushed voice.

Hop sighed deeply to himself, rubbing his face, "Joyce...there is a **storm** coming. If the girl is out here, we *need* to find her before then."

"I KNOW!" she raised her voice, slamming her hands onto the sides of her pants. She held her elbows nervously, knowing the dangers of a storm in Hawkins. It meant flooding, and she wasn't sure if Eleven knew how to swim in open water. "...I'm not saying we don't look for her. We have to refill the box anyway. But I am *NOT* letting you *distract* them with your *stupid* plan!" Hopper shook his head at her nonsense attitude. "What do you think, they're just gonna *follow* you? They're corrupt Hop but they are *not* stupid," she pointed to the far-off road.

He kicked the leaves with his boot, defeated. "...fine." It was all she needed to move on from his planning. She took the lead this time as they stepped over the dry leaves, moving as quietly as they could through the forest. After passing numerous trees – all standing proud and tall – they approached a lonely bread box. Joyce couldn't take her eyes off it; it was such a simple thing that Hop was banking on. *Could it really be...?* Hop knelt down before it, turning over his shoulder and asking, "Watch my back?" She nodded, nervously scanning each direction. She heard the box creak as it opened. She figured the hinges were rusted over with age...then Hopper gasped.

"What is it?" she peered down at the crate. Several food items lay within its timbers...including the eggos from his last visit. Hopper zoned in on the wrapped waffles, his mind growing darker and bleaker with each moment he wasted. He thought of his daughter losing her appetite during her last days, how he had to *convince* her to eat her pudding even though she cringed whenever it touched her lips. The woman observed Hopper's face, open and vulnerable to sadness or anger or happiness or fear...but it registered nothing. Hop imagined that...them hiking all the way out here, all of his private visits and the evidence. The half-eaten eggo...was there nothing left now? Should they even keep searching? Was abandoning hope going to mitigate this pain of losing a child all over again? Or would it hurt ten times as much?! These questions all presented themselves to Hopper at once, and he remained knelt before the crate, speechless.

Joyce knew this couldn't go on. They'd come all the way out here, and she'd be *damned* if they didn't find her. "Hop we still have to call her. What if she...just hasn't come by yet?" she suggested. He slowly returned to his feet, dropping another pack of eggos into the open crate and *slamming* it shut. Joyce jumped as Hopper slowly began walking towards the edge of the forest, a subtle determination behind those tired blue eyes. His silence unnerved her as they trekked beneath the clouds, the woman wordlessly following the much taller man. The only warning she received was a single drop tapping her on the nose, and suddenly the heavens burst apart as a downpour ensued. They reached the side of the road, remaining well out of sight of the men by the fence. Rainwater splashed against the blacktop, pattering noisily. Several workers stood, perusing the damages. One of them held a slumbering chainsaw in his hands, but the others were peering up at the sky, gesturing about the rain. Yellow caution tape connected the two divided fences above the log. Half of the men used this dip to retreat inside the fortress. Three remained by the log as one of them woke up the chainsaw, pulling the tethered cable twice. Its roar echoed between the trees, bouncing off of every raindrop and traveling well past Cornwallis and Kerley. Hopper and Joyce eyed each other instinctively. The added noise would conceal their voices...for now. Especially if they called in the opposite direction.

This was it. This was their chance...maybe their only chance at finding her.

Hopper nodded to Joyce confidently and they switched direction, moving back into the forest. Joyce was the first to call out as Hopper watched the technicians from behind a tree. "Eleven!" The number sounded foreign and odd on her tongue. Hopper suddenly raised a warning hand as one of the technicians gazed lazily into the forest. There was the rain, slapping loudly against the pavement, and then there was the chainsaw, deafening and shrill. *Was it not loud enough?* Hopper was sure that all they needed was bound to come. When a flash of light split the sky, Joyce watched as he turned away from the street and cupped his hands.

"ELEVEN!" his voice melted into the booming thunder, cloaking it completely. Joyce and Hop gazed expectantly towards the street...but

the workers simply continued their cleanup. There were no looks of suspicion plastered upon their faces; they all looked quite miserable actually, soaking wet and cold. "Good, they can't hear us...wait for the lightning and then call," he instructed, beginning to move further away from the road. Joyce nodded in confirmation as another bolt of lightning ripped like a scar across the sky. They simultaneously called out, "ELEVEN!" The duo slowly picked their way back through the trees, shouting out her name whenever the sky flashed with light. It reminded Joyce of the lights on her wall...how she'd communicated with Will when he was trapped in that chasm of a place. She shook her head at this ridiculous comparison, calling out along with Hopper more frequently now. Neither of them waited for the lights anymore; the street was far behind them. They passed the crate and Hopper eyed it tiredly. His feet ached but he caught his breath, freezing in place as the rain dripped endlessly off his hat.

The box lay open...and empty beside him as another peal of thunder roared above the din.

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: Thanks SO MUCH for reading this far! Follow for more and leave a review if you want, I hope you're enjoying it! Tell me if I could be doing something better! Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*

## 9. For My Help

### Chapter Nine – For My Help

The rain fell in long sheets, thoroughly drenching everything it touched. It trickled down the bark of all the trees as the roots hungrily soaked in the liquid life. A particular tree stood especially damp as precipitation dripped into its midsection, falling from a tiny hollow and onto the soil. Drops fell from the fleshy ceiling onto a sleeping body as the chainsaw growled to life. The lonely girl jerked awake, eyes wide and immediately alert. *What sound is that?!* Thunder ripped across the sky and she flinched, covering her ears. Her stomach ached with a familiar hollowness. The wind was a bitter cold, so she brought her knees up towards her chin, clinging to them hopelessly. Each crash of thunder sent her eyes slamming shut and her face contorting in confusion. How much colder could it get? She knew from experience that if she stayed out in the rain too long, it'd leave her shivering for hours. Her stomach growled again, sparks of pain igniting her core.

Frightened eyes peered from inside the hollow. She didn't have much wiggle room since the spot was barely large enough to cradle her in the tiniest bit of warmth. The soles of her feet burned against the soil and she grimaced at the stinging sensation, peering up at the clouds. She was shocked to find that it was night. Nights were sacred times for her to stargaze, but these clouds shrouded her tiny friends in suits of grey and black. Not to mention the *terrifying* noise that roared whenever the jagged lights flickered in the sky. And then there was that angry sound, shrieking and hiccuping in an indeterminable sequence. She'd already heard thunder, but she'd never noticed the streaks of white that scratched the sky before each clap. It was a truly brilliant sight and the girl stared in awe, retreating back into the hollow at each heavenly rumble.

Her hands were stained black and her dress was tattered, hanging close to her knees in shreds. Somewhere along the way she'd lost one of her shoes, ditching its partner (she couldn't afford to hobble with one shoe on). The scrawny girl clutched her stomach as it rumbled loudly, nearly in-sync with the echoing thunder. *Is the sky hungry?*



*Maybe that's why it's crying...?* She remembered those long, starving nights spent gazing up at the stars as tears rolled down her temples. The pain had been so intense...but it wasn't all physical; she hungered for more than just food. Words...she *desperately* missed listening to other people's voices, seeing their faces *light up* with emotion as they told her things. Lucas and Dustin prattling on about *Lando* and *spit-swears* and *Lord of the Rings*...but she mostly remembered Mike's words. She missed holding onto him as he pedaled them to safety...and she **really** missed Dustin's snacks right about now. As the rain dripped onto her scalp and down her chin, she peered out at the mossy rock. She knew that if she made it there, she'd be able to find the box. The girl sighed deeply, her fingers gripping the sappy leaves as she pulled herself from the tree.

*"Just hold on a little longer okay? He's gone...the Bad Man's gone...we'll be home soon. And...my mom...she'll get you your own bed, and you can eat as many eggos as you want..."*

She stood in the endless rain, her mind replaying that last scene once again.

*"And...we can go to the Snow Ball."*

Her eyes drifted shut as the rain greedily smothered her, washing over her eyelids and around her temples. Streaks of garnet lingered beneath her nostrils and below her ears. It helped to rinse the blood from her skin and the dirt from her arms. The last time she'd used her powers, she'd almost killed someone. It wasn't just anyone either...it was Mike's best friend...the one she'd been searching for. While irony was a nonexistent term in her limited vocabulary, she definitely noted the oddity of her rediscovering the boy. The only difference was that their roles were reversed; *she* was lost and *he* was found. She stood in the pouring rain, listening closely for anything hiding behind the ruckus. There was no way for her to know he'd been that close...that she'd nearly crushed him! All she wanted was to keep people from using the road...from getting that close to the bad men. Her eyes drifted shut as she remembered this morning...

*It had been too late to yell. She watched him fly through the air as her own vision blurred and her mind clouded over. Unable to stand, her knees folded and she collapsed to the soil, keeping a semi-conscious eye on him*

*as her dizziness overpowered her. The sun was glaring, but she still watched as the leaves tumbled to the ground, uprooted from their fallen home. He fumbled, peering back at the tree in shock. The wheels on his bike were still rotating as Will slumped onto the pavement, groaning to himself. He didn't look much better than she felt...but then he stopped moving and she caught her breath. Fighting her own vertigo, she rose to her feet, approaching the unconscious boy. Bare feet padded softly against the blacktop. Her face registered all of the panic and fear coursing through her as she knelt beside him. Shaking him was pointless, so she gripped his jacket collar and dragged him to the side of the road. The wheels on his bike finally stopped spinning, and as the girl regained her clarity, she continued dragging him through the forest.*

Her tiny muscles still ached from that long trip, and how she'd made it back was beyond her. She supposed that since she'd traveled there in the Upside Down, it was easier for her to remember the way. Her eyes closed regretfully. Oh how she wished Joyce had been there to comfort her...someone besides the fluffy yellow animal that shouted in loud scary bursts. She told herself that if she'd waited there with him, things may have been different...she wouldn't be standing in the forest during a monsoon. She might have been able to see Mike again...but she didn't have to be well-versed in the English language to know her presence was dangerous. Before she'd ran away from Papa, the world was cruel and the people were mostly unforgiving. She shuddered, remembering the dark rooms and the bouts of crying until she ran out of tears. On the outside of the fences, everyone was *much* kinder and gentler. Was it normal? She sure hoped so. Her mind raced with thought as she decided...it had to be! She lowered her gaze solemnly, the rain cropping her hair close to her scalp. If it was normal...then she could *never* leave these trees. Her eyes watered as she remembered Benny and his food. Why had he helped her? All it did was get him killed!

This was her place, free, amongst the trees and the plants, where no one would find her. If she stayed here, everyone she cared for would remain safe...for the rest of their lives.

Her stomach roared, fed up with the hunger. She sighed, eyes widening at the empty feeling. The girl swallowed nervously. All she had to do was make it to the box, grab anything she could, and run.

She started off through the woods, touching the mossy rock in a sentimental manner as she passed it. That was *her* landmark...a halfway point of sorts. From that point on, she headed left between the two nearest trees and followed a straight path towards the box. Her feet burned with each step and she winced, peering between the wooden giants at the clearing. Instinctively quickening her pace, she reached the crate and eagerly threw it open. Without looking she grabbed at random items, cautiously surveying her surroundings. Why was this box always full? Was it...*normal* for people to leave food in boxes in the middle of the woods? Was it like how they danced at places called schools during Snowballs? As she mulled over the possibilities – hoping she wasn't desecrating some hallowed ritual – a voice cut through the clangor.

"ELEVEN!" She jumped, clutching the food to her chest and peering wide-eyed into the darkness. Another voice, this one lower and manlier.

"ELEVEN!"

Their shouts mixed with the thunder in a terrifying combination. They sounded faintly familiar...as if she knew them from a dream. Then the man's voice called again, *much* louder than before and she bolted in the opposite direction, hefting the food close to her frame. Since she escaped her old home, she'd become *very* familiar with running. She loved running...but not this kind. Her heart was in her throat as she scaled rocks and roots, her fatigue quickly overtaking her. *Eat*, she told herself. Stopping behind a tree, her fingers struggled on the slippery plastic covering the eggos. She finally tore it open with her nails and bit into the lukewarm food, sinking to the ground in relief.

They were sweet and fluffy and she almost cried, flinching again at the shouts behind her. Having no time to savor them, she *devoured* the checkered circles and opened a small plastic container. Her stomach was still growling as she stared at the unknown meat, layered in thin, pink slices before her. She sniffed it, decided she liked the smell and grabbed a piece. The slimy texture was extremely off-putting, but she didn't care. "ELEVEN!" The voice was close, closer than *any* of the earlier calls. She nearly choked on the ham as she shoved the rest into her mouth, ditching the container and sprinting

into the forest. The wind pressed against her, whispering for her to turn back; the sheets of rain pummeled her as she continued running.

After a minute of traveling at full speed, she slowed to a stop, peering around for the mossy stone. It was nowhere to be found. A wave of terror swept over her as she stumbled about, searching for some recognizable woodland feature. A scream lay buried within her chest as her panic mounted, and she rapidly shook her head. Her body was one tiny, electric current that was quickly sparking out of control. She shook her hands beside her, tiny droplets flinging from them as she circled the tiny clearing over and over. "Lost..." she exhaled. It was the first word she'd said in a month. Tears were wetting her eyes. "Lost," she croaked, throat closing with indescribable fear. She knelt down, holding her head and slamming her eyes shut at the deafening storm. The sky was alight with white-hot bolts, and almost every other second there was a crash of thunder.

The calls only grew louder, "ELEVEN!" She jerked to look over her shoulder, hyperventilating uncontrollably. Water soaked into her faded dress as it clung to her figure. "ELEVEN!" That voice... something in her memory rekindled itself. Still, it wasn't quick enough to stop her from jolting to her feet, rushing off into the unknown. The girl dodged trees and barely avoided tripping on the roots and fallen branches. A wide log lay before her and she skid to a halt, hopping onto it with her stomach and scrambling over the top. The instant her foot touched the soggy leaves, something gripped her ankle and pulled her from the log. The back of her head struck the bark as she was torn across the dirt. A scream burst from her as her world flipped upside down. All sixty-three pounds of Eleven was yanked into the air and she shrieked with terror, dangling precariously by a single leg. Her tears mixed into her already drenched hair as she screamed helplessly, twirling about by the rope. She reached up with her arms, desperately trying to grasp it, peeking over her shoulder at the ground below. The soil looked so far away and she sobbed, unable to loosen the snare.

"Hop..." Joyce turned, eyeballing the dark space to her left. She wasn't sure if she actually heard it...or if it was some vicious hallucination or imaginary voice. But something in Joyce's gut told her to listen. Hopper was sifting through the darkness, looking for a

trail of some kind. "H-Hop, did you hear that?" she asked, blindly reaching into the air to tap his shoulder.

"Hear what?" he prompted, peeking behind him. His plastic food container with the red lid lay atop the roots of a tree. He stomped towards it, kneeling down to touch the plastic wrap. It was probably the closest thing to a breadcrumb trail they'd get. Joyce appeared behind him, looking over his shoulder at the abandoned items. Her eyes widened at the sight.

"Hop?"

He turned over his shoulder, "She's close Joyce..." Another one of her screams jumped between the trees, chancing the silence between claps of thunder. They both turned, practically hopeful and rushed after the sound.

"Eleven! Where are you?!" a familiar person called. The girl hung by her red ankle, the blood rushing to her head. She sobbed, her arms stretched out below her. The non-stop noise heightened her fear and she felt sick to her stomach. It was like this every day...something new appeared and absolutely terrified her. She needed someone to tell her what was good and what wasn't. For instance, she'd found out the *hard* way that mushrooms were not food. She sobbed, *knowing* that if Mike or Joyce were here, they'd help her. And it was for this reason she stayed hidden.

She shook her head as the rope tightened and she yelped in pain. What had tricked her into believing she could actually survive by herself?

She watched as her tears fell from her nose to the ground, and she traced the fall with her finger, fully extending her arm. While her reach was too short to grasp anything below, she could tilt her head upwards to eye the rope. It was slung over a branch *far* above her, and her eyes followed it until she spotted its end, hooked within a stake that was plunged into the soil. Fatigued and desperate, she breathed deeply, anxious to escape the sickening trap. She already felt heady from being flipped for so long, but she squinted determinedly anyway, focusing on the stake. Her eyes twitched and she trembled a bit, mustering the last bits of her energy and violently

twisting her head. The stake was ripped from the earth and the rope slipped over the branch, noisily sliding through the falling rain.

She immediately plummeted five feet to the ground, crashing onto her back. The wind was knocked from her as thunder shouted from the sky. She could only offer a horizontal response as the raindrops fell directly onto her form, tapping her lightly on the face and hands. The very space above her was *crowded* with raindrops as they slid by one another, rushing only to crash-land into the earth. A single whimper escaped her lips before exhaustion consumed her. She shivered with cold, hearing her name echo about the bustling air as one of the noises ceased.

Joyce and Hopper turned towards the road as the chainsaw went silent. "What are they doing?" Joyce asked, nervously bumping him in the arm.

"They must be done with the tree..." Hopper stated, noticing a rope swaying in the wind. It sagged with liquid, stuck around a high branch. He looked down and his eyes widened. "JOYCE!" he called. She returned to his side, gasping at the sight. Neither of them moved at first; they remained frozen to each other's shoulders like magnets, individually astounded...until their fears returned. Hopper cleared the log and sank onto his haunches, pressing two fingers to the girl's carotid. Joyce noticed shreds of her dress caught on the bark of the log and she carefully hopped over it.

"We need to get her out of here. She's freezing!" Joyce said, pressing a palm to her cheek. Her lips were blue and her eyelids had a hollow look about them.

"Alright...I'll carry her. You *need* to keep an eye out," he reminded her, lifting the girl into his arms with ease.

"Hop..." she clung to the Eleven's icy hand. "I-Is she gonna be okay?" Hop could tell all Joyce wanted to do was hold her close. But if they stayed out much longer, she'd get sick with cold.

"Joyce! Right now the best thing for her is shelter," he exclaimed, confidently moving past her. His boots slid in the mud and he nearly toppled over when the rope got caught on the log. Joyce hastily

undid the snare, releasing her reddened ankle.

"Oh *God*...poor girl," she sighed, rushing back to the front as Hopper picked his way through the muck.

"Lead the way Joyce," he instructed, watching the girl's open face. He noticed a rivulet of blood beneath her nose. When he saw her ears were leaking as well, massive shadows crept over his previously hopeful thoughts. His eyes dimmed, wishing he could wipe the streaks away. He lengthened his strides, widening his gait to cover more ground without slipping. Joyce had to walk faster to make up for her shorter strides, continually eyeing the girl worriedly. They walked for minutes in this fashion, occasionally stopping to check their backs. Once they broke the tree line bordering Cornwallis, they crept towards Hopper's patrol car. Joyce opened the door and he placed her in the back seat, buckling her in as she laid on her side. Then they entered the car, both peering behind them at the unconscious girl.

"How long do you think she's been out there?" Joyce asked, brow pinched with worry.

"I'm not sure..." he confessed. He thought back to when food had first started disappearing from the box and guessed, "At least a few weeks..." Joyce gasped, removing her coat and draping it over the girl's midsection.

"I'm gonna take her in Hop..." Joyce volunteered.

The chief eyed her. He'd figured as much, but he wasn't sure Joyce could afford to feed another child. "Are you sure Joyce?" he asked, driving towards her home beneath the flashes of lightning. This question was almost pointless, because Hopper was positive he'd be helping her regardless.

"Yes," she confirmed, nodding assuredly. "I can take care of her..." Joyce trailed off, peering back at the girl. "She needs a mother..." Hopper nodded at this, despite already knowing her mother, Terry Ives. He couldn't deny the fact that Joyce had connected with the girl quicker than anyone else had...besides the Wheeler boy. This was okay, he told himself. This would do...

...for now.

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: WOW that was THE longest chapter. PHEW. Glad I got that out of my system. I'm enjoying writing this little fan-fiction and putting it all together so I hope you guys are too! Fret not, the story is *far* from over! So, follow for more and maybe leave a review if you wish. Thanks again for reading. Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*



## 10. No More

### Chapter Ten – No More

The clock read two forty-nine. Jonathan paced about the living room, keeping an attentive ear in case his brother began coughing again. He honestly couldn't believe Will was sleeping through the storm, because he sure couldn't. *Where was Joyce?! She'd NEVER stayed out this late before.* Perhaps if his situation wasn't this dire, he'd be calmer; that's what he thought as he planted himself on the sofa, tapping an anxious heel on the carpet. Several claps of thunder tore across the sky and occasionally made him jump. *What if she's caught somewhere in the storm?* His hands clasped together, fingers interlocking in a semi-comforting gesture as the rain slid off their roof. Jonathan was beginning to worry *for* Joyce instead of just *about* her. Plus, he had work tomorrow morning *and* Will had school. Just as he was considering phoning the police, the living room windows illuminated with headlights and Jonathan shot to his feet, throwing the front door open. He met Joyce halfway between Hopper's car and their porch as the chief reached for something in the back seat. Joyce was unnaturally tense, and she expected a volatile reaction from her eldest son. She'd never checked in with him before the search, and they both began talking at once. "Jonathan I was-

"Mom! Will is-" They both stammered to a silence as Jonathan continued, sighing in exasperation, "It's Will...he's sick." She stared at him, reading his expression. He didn't have to say a word; she could tell by the tiny lines bunched between his eyebrows that things were bad. Jonathan's focus was detracted once he noticed Hop carrying someone towards their house. The light from their living room was thrown onto the grass in a long rectangle as Joyce hurried inside. Hopper stepped into the light and Jonathan stared at what he carried. It was *that* girl. "Hopper?" he asked, following him inside. Wordlessly, Hopper set the girl onto their couch, wrapping her in multiple blankets and feeling her forehead. "Is she okay?" Jonathan asked, his voice a mix of sadness and shock. Hopper said nothing as he tended to the girl, his lips tight as a drum. Jonathan stood dumbfounded for a second before rushing into Will's room. Their mother was already leant over him, gingerly waking him.

"Will? Hey Will," she gently rocked him awake. His eyes blinked open, but both mother and sibling knew he was not fully conscious. Will had been in such a deep sleep that he probably wouldn't remember this exchange in the morning. It just comforted Joyce to see his sweet smile. "*Hey* buddy...how you feeling?" she asked, smoothing a hand through his chestnut hair.

"Mmm..." Will hummed agreeably to himself, his eyes clouded over with slumber.

"Alright well, you just go on back to sleep. We'll see you in the morning..." Joyce smiled at her son. He was adorable when he was sleepy like this. Will nodded, smiling and letting his eyes slowly drift shut.

"I can't believe it..." Jonathan mused in a hushed whisper.

"What?" she asked just as quietly, walking towards the door.

Jonathan shook his head, shrugging and scratching the back, "His wheezing stopped." A full-bellied scream rang through their house followed by a shuffle and crash. Joyce and her son eyed the sleeping form as he simply shifted position, deaf to the chaotic noises emanating from their living room. As Joyce rushed off to Hop's aid, Jonathan *carefully* shut Will's door, hoping he'd remain peacefully asleep. He didn't think he could explain *any* of what was happening right now.

"El! Honey, *calm* down it's just Hop!" she consoled from Hopper's side. The thin girl had backed herself into a corner after *throwing* the man across the room. Her nose dripped red as she sulked against the sturdy wall, exhausted and pale. Jonathan watched from the edge of the room as Joyce gingerly approached her. The way everyone was staring made El nervous and she leaned further back, rapidly blinking her dizziness away. She watched Joyce, finally recalling those warm brown eyes as friendly ones. "It's me, Joyce...do you remember?" Exhausted and starved of interaction, the girl simply nodded, tears forming in the corners of her eyes. She still regarded them cautiously, and Joyce could tell. "Oh honey...it's okay...it's alright," Joyce coaxed her from the edge, extending a hand to her in a gesture of peace and love. "I'm here. We're here for you...you're *not* alone anymore..." Her

words were pleading but gentle and her son watched in awe.

Jonathan observed as the tiny girl took one step, then another, and finally collapsed into Joyce's arms, sobbing what seemed like months of bottled emotions and pain into his mother's embrace. Eleven's heart was bleeding, cleansing itself of every insecurity she'd had about whether she should find them. She shivered, crying into the woman's shoulder, clutching her arm desperately. Hopper stood, stretching his arm in a swinging motion. When Eleven gazed up at him and saw him wince, her eyes leaked and her face contorted with sorrow. "That's Chief Hopper...remember him?"

"Yes," she replied, voice breaking a bit.

"He's a *good* guy. He's here to protect us..." Joyce reminded Eleven, stroking a gentle hand over her short dark hair. It was certainly cleaner after all the rain came down, but there was still plenty of dirt and grime covering the girl. Joyce turned to the two men, "I'm gonna give her a bath." At the mere mention of the word *bath*, Eleven cringed, wringing free from Joyce's grasp. Her fears plagued her like a sickness as Joyce stared at her curiously.

"It's not that kind of bath," Hop burst in, remembering her connection to the sensory deprivation tanks. El eyed him suspiciously, her eyebrows lowering in a confused expression. "It's for, getting clean..." he trailed off, nodding reassuringly at her. "Don't worry, Joyce will help you." He turned towards Jonathan, "I need to talk to you."

"S-Sure..." Jonathan stammered, still confounded by the day's events. Joyce watched as they moved to the back porch. She saw how El was watching with her, a worried look on her face.

"It's okay. That's Jonathan. He's my son...like Will is, but, older," Joyce explained. Eleven nodded comprehensively as Joyce rose to her feet. El tried to stand with her but grimaced in pain. Small steps made her legs tremble, and she saw El curling her feet outwards, walking on the outermost edges. "What's wrong?" Joyce asked, grasping her arm tenderly. El dropped to her knees with a hiss, looking down to her feet and wincing. Joyce saw how the soles were cut and bleeding, clogged with dirt. The sight screamed infection and Joyce caught her breath. "Oh honey..." she consoled, moving one of

El's toes to get a better look at the cuts. "I'll be *right* back, okay?" she asked. El nodded, biting her lip at the not-so familiar rush of pain.

"There are a lot of people out looking for that girl..." Hopper stated, lighting a cigarette. "They usually gun down anyone who gets in their way..."

"Yeah...those people from the Department of Energy..." Jonathan recalled, crossing his arms. Hopper nodded, blowing the smoke into the open air, away from the teenager.

"You gotta keep this under wraps, or *else*," the chief declared in a low tone. "As far as they know, that girl is either lost or dead. Got it?"

"Got it..." Jonathan nodded a little grimly, staring blankly at his boots.

"How's your brother doing?" Hop asked. This snapped Jonathan from his thoughts.

"Oh...better. Much better than before..." he replied, stumbling over his words a bit. "But I don't even know how he got home..." He paused, sighing to himself miserably. "One second he's biking along Mirkwood, the next he almost gets *crushed* by a falling tree...then he ends up *here*, unconscious..." Jonathan gestured, shaking his head in exasperation. "You don't think..."

"What?" Hopper pried, talking over the boy's unsure silences.

"...I was just thinking...about how those guys from the state work so secretly..." Jonathan sighed, closing his eyes with doubt.

"...you think they brought him back and left him?" Hopper asked.

"...I don't know what to think anymore. All I know is that Will was on Mirkwood and that he was *really* sick before you guys got back..." Jonathan fumbled about with his hands and his words. Hopper considered this, resting his hands on his hips in a stern expression. This was a curious assumption...but a possible one at that. "What if they did something to him?" he eyed the chief worriedly, his thoughts wandering too far and wide.

"Let's hope not..." Hopper sighed, his breath white with smoke.

"Okay hold on a second...don't move..." Joyce instructed, gripping the girl's ankle. Eleven stared alarmingly at Joyce as she warned her, "This is going to sting a little..." Before El had the chance to ask what *sting* was, Joyce pressed an alcohol pad to her foot and the girl *howled* in pain, face cringing with terror. Hopper and Jonathan appeared in seconds, observing as Eleven gritted her teeth and balling her fists in agony. Joyce quickly removed the pad as she kicked wildly, fresh tears staining her cheeks. She stared at Joyce as if eyeing a traitor as the woman explained, "I'm *so* sorry...I *know* it hurts but it's the *only* thing that's gonna clean it! And if we don't clean it...well, you could lose your foot!" Eleven's shoulders jumped at how bad stinging felt, locking in the new word forever. "You have to let me do this..." Joyce sighed, her emotions running high. The girl simply stared at her, hastily shaking her head. She thought she was finished with pain, and here it was rushing back to her, and by Joyce's hand! The woman sighed, eyeing the men hopelessly. Then a light bulb went off. "I have an idea..." Joyce went to the couch, grabbing a pillow and handing it to Eleven. "Whenever it hurts, you just squeeze that pillow *as hard as you can*. I know how bad it feels and I'm *so* sorry..." Joyce pointed at the pillow instructively. It was a sad sight, but the boys knew it was necessary. The soles of Eleven's feet faced them, and they could see the lacerations, red with anger. Hopper and Jonathan returned to the porch, quiet with contemplation.

"You guys have a *big* job on your hands..." Hopper shook his head, picking up the smoke he'd dropped on the tiny table.

"...we do?" Jonathan asked. "I thought we were just gonna, take care of her..."

"Well, where else is she gonna go? You guys are her family now and you have to deal with that..." Both of them jumped as Eleven screeched in pain. They could hear Joyce consoling her in a strong voice, talking over her cries. Jonathan's face locked, devoid of any emotion besides guilt as Hopper shook his head, eyeing the horizon worriedly. "...kid's got a set of lungs on her..." They both sighed at nearly the same time, trying to block out her cries.

"Almost done sweetie..." Joyce hushed, grimacing as she cleaned the

last wound. El's lip trembled as she held in a shout, her eyes shutting as she squeezed the pillow. The next time it burned she buried her face into the softness and it did wonders to muffle her cries. The moment Joyce released her ankle she wrapped her arms around the sobbing mess, whispering words of comfort into her ear. "It's alright, it's okay...I'm all done now...no more stinging..."

"No more..." El repeated as Joyce wiped her nose and ears of old blood. Joyce reached over and grabbed four rolls of gauze from her tiny first aid kit and returned to El's feet. "No more?" El asked, eyes wide with fear as Joyce unwrapped the gauze.

"I just have to wrap them up so they don't get dirty again...after this, *no more*," Joyce reassured her. The gauze didn't hurt *nearly* as much as the stinging did and a sigh of relief escaped her, her eyes blinking tiredly. "See? It's not that bad..." Joyce watched her expressions closely, careful to make this part as painless as possible. El nodded, wiping her face with both her hands. She got dirt all over her cheeks and forehead, watching Joyce's work obliviously. The woman sighed, wondering how she'd ever get her clean.

"Joyce...I'm gonna head home," Hopper informed her. It was nearly three in the morning and he needed to return to the station by six. "If you need anything, just call me, okay?"

"Hop I was actually wondering..." Joyce finished wrapping her feet – to the best of her ability – and walked to his side. She pointed at her feet and whispered, "How am I gonna give her a bath if her feet are... like *that*?" They both gazed at the strange child, pondering this as Eleven returned a blank stare.

"...don't even bother with that. The wraps should stay, and if the water gets bloody just wrap them tighter," Hopper suggested, eyeing Joyce tiredly. "She needs a bath Joyce...let her unwind and detox after everything..." Joyce nodded as she noticed Eleven shivering, rubbing her arms with filthy hands.

"You're right," she agreed, smiling at him gratefully. Their eyes were tired compared to Eleven's as the couple eyed one another admiringly. "Thanks Hop."

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: THANKS FOR READING! Good lord I've been so busy. I was dying to finish this and upload it. I hope you guys are enjoying the story so far. Follow for more and leave a review if you wish, constructive criticism included! Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*

## 11. Baby Steps

Authors Note: I just want to say that this show...this AMAZING story that the Duffer Brothers spun from their very imaginations has made me stronger. You don't need a degree in writing to see the obvious themes of love and trust and friendship that Stranger Things so expertly highlights. This whole fan-fiction thing is just me expressing my love for the show. But the fandom itself is a group effort...there are (at least) fifty to one-hundred music videos out there for this particular fandom (possibly more) and TONS of spectacular fan-art drawn by avid fans like myself...and I can say they've inspired me to continue this story. I know, I know, it'd be kind of poetic to end it on the eleventh chapter...but I'm not gonna stop here. There is literally SO MANY THINGS Eleven still has to experience; so many facets of our society she knows nothing of! I'm not writing this to let you know the story is going to get boring because quite the opposite is true. I have a very detailed plan on how I'd like to end this story and it could potentially go on for MANY chapters until I feel I'm ready to finish it. There will be blood, violence and lots of fluff (I know you guys love that shit. Who doesn't?) so I hope that you guys decide to keep on reading and writing to your hearts content. And if for some reason you are unable to do these things, paint! Or draw a picture! Or make a music video, or simply blog about how much you love your favorite show. For me, I write about this, and that's how I show my love. If I knew how, I would LITERALLY start a petition to ensure Eleven returns to Season Two because I know the future is uncertain. I think that's part of why I'm writing this...I didn't want to see El go. When she did it crushed Mike, which in-turn crushed the hearts of so many viewers out there (including myself). But in reality, they are all fictional characters. I'm writing this for you and I'm writing it for me. And I'm gonna keep on writing. I hope you all enjoy. -*Nightlock*

### Chapter Eleven – Baby Steps

"Don't mention it. Like I said...*anything*. Just give me a call," Hopper added, nodding Joyce's way. He exited the house, nearly to his car when he heard Joyce behind him.

"Hey Hop!" she began a little awkwardly.



"Yeah?"

"You remember when I said she...she needed a mother?" Joyce asked, rolling her eyes at her own emotionally charged statement. They both knew Terry was by blood...but Eleven knew nothing of this woman. Joyce was the closest thing she'd get.

"Yeah," Hop nodded, watching her fumble about with her words a little comically. *Like mother like son*, he thought.

"Well...I was gonna say that she...probably needs a, *father* figure too," Joyce shrugged, eyeing Hop, then suddenly staring into the grass. There was a silence between them as Hopper smiled to himself.

"Joyce...are you proposing?" he asked in a low chuckle.

"Uh!" the woman clicked her teeth, shoving him away jokingly. "No!" she chuckled. They both laughed quietly as Eleven peered from behind the screen door. A wondering hand splayed itself against the mesh as curious eyes gazed into the darkness.

"Because you know I'd say yes, right?" Hopper asked, still chuckling along with the woman. At first he couldn't believe his words. It was like he was too tired for restraint, and his honesty decided to reveal itself.

"No I mean if you're-" she froze in the middle of her sentence, replaying what Hopper had just said. She peered up at him and before she knew it he'd planted a kiss onto her cheek, his beard grazing against her face in the cold of night. Eleven gasped, recognizing this interaction and *instantly* remembering the cafeteria and Mike and the pudding. How he'd practically *slammed* his face into hers and their lips had touched. And now *they* were doing that, except...a little differently. *What could it mean?* She remembered her shock and confusion after Mike's face had left hers. It wasn't because she'd disliked it...she just, *wasn't* expecting such an odd action. It was so out of the blue, and she hadn't done anything to earn it...whatever it was. Mike had acted of his own volition...there were no questions or tests to complete. She watched as the exact same scenario unfolded before her as Hopper put his hat on, chuckling to himself. For a moment she was worried about the woman as Joyce stood

frozen in place.

"Hey Joyce, guess what?"

"What?" she asked, officially flustered beyond recognition.

"It stopped raining," he noted. She looked to the sky, laughing with him into the air. While the clouds hung heavy and thick, blotting out the millions of stars and the moon, it held the rain in, offering them the slightest of reprieves. The girl who watched from within knew nothing of her importance; how she'd brought them together amidst their struggles and differences. Joyce remembered looking into the box at the untouched food, shuddering at the thoughts that had invaded her mind, foreshadowing a much darker fate. Joyce knew that if things had been different - if Eleven had stepped into another kind of trap or lost the food box - she would have gently closed the door and gently turned the key. It would've told them not to worry or fear what they might see. They even could've abandoned their search, returning home and never contacting one another, their hearts as empty as their hands. *What kind of woman would that have made me?* "Goodnight Joyce. I'll see you tomorrow," he bid her farewell, climbing into his car. She leant into the car window and grasped Hop's hand, gazing into his eyes. Eleven watched, enchanted with the entire interaction, pausing to look down at her own stained hands. When she looked back up their faces had *just* separated. The girl jumped with surprise. *Had she missed something?!* As Hopper drove off and Joyce returned to the house – smiling very broadly – El limped back towards the carpet, pretending she hadn't seen *any* of what had just occurred. The screen opened and Joyce sighed happily, locking the door behind her. El watched curiously.

"You ready to get clean?" Joyce asked, offering the frightened girl a tired smile. It took a moment to register, then El nodded, following Joyce into the bathroom. After shutting the door, Joyce turned on the tub's faucet. The water rushed into the tub so loudly that El jumped, eyeing it nervously. Joyce simply grasped her hand, gentle and reassuring. "It's okay. You'll like this, I think..." Joyce comforted her, checking to ensure the water stayed warm. They sat across from each other – El had trouble standing with her wounds – with Joyce cradling both of El's hands in her larger ones. The tub filled with liquid and El's lips parted, staring at the steam curiously. Joyce

turned the water off and asked the girl, "Can you take your dress off?"

El looked down at herself, then back up at Joyce worriedly. It had been a *long* time, but she hadn't forgotten nearly *scarring* the boys in the basement. She didn't want to offend Joyce of all the people she loved, so she repeated the long-lost word to Joyce as best as she could, "Pri-vac-y..."

"Oh...well, here's the thing..." Joyce trailed off, rubbing her elbow confusingly. "You and I, we're both girls, so we have the same...parts. The same bodies...but boys are, *different*..."

"Different?" El echoed. A sigh escaped Joyce's jaw as the girl watched her, hopelessly lost. It was *way* too soon for *the talk*, but simplifying it was surprisingly difficult.

"Yeah..." Joyce sighed, resting her chin in the cup of her hand. "...okay...Eleven?" Joyce regained the girl's dwindling focus.

"Yes?"

"I am going to take care of you...like a mom," she said. Joyce's nerves calmed a bit as the girl offered her a genuine smile...albeit a small one. "Mothers are allowed to see their babies naked, but *no one* else is..." Joyce tried to explain.

El eyed her, looking sad and a bit disappointed in herself, "What is... *naked*?" Now Joyce was confused. How did she know about *privacy* but, not the word *naked*?

"It's when you don't have any clothes on," she defined simply. El locked this in, eventually nodding and wriggling out of her tattered dress. Joyce had to help her with the zipper in the back, but once it was undone, it fell from her frame. Joyce noted how skinny she'd become, watching her worriedly. Her heart bled at the thought of before...how lost she'd been and how alone she must've felt. But now the girl stood before her, an expression of unashamed calm gracing her face. Joyce took her hand and led her to the bath. "It's gonna be a little warm," Joyce informed her as Eleven rose a leg over the tub. Her face immediately changed as the liquid lapped at her foot. As she slowly submerged more and more of herself – gripping Joyce's

shoulder for support – her skin tingled at the wonderful sensation. She could feel goosebumps race across her body as if the water were ice cold, but it was *different*; she didn't feel horrible and there was no shivering! Eleven didn't know she could even *feel* this warm, having been raised in a world of cold floors and air-conditioning. Her eyes closed and her brow raised as she lowered herself into the water, her very nerves unwinding at the euphoria. For the first time in weeks her muscles relaxed and the tension slowly left her body. Joyce watched her face, endlessly intrigued. *Is this her first real bath?* "It feels nice, doesn't it?" Joyce mused, smiling warmly at the girl.

"Warm..." Eleven breathed, her eyes closing in sublime relaxation.

"Well...you can take a bath *whenever* you want," Joyce offered, looking about for the bar of soap. She found a large cup and opened a new box of soap, grabbing a washcloth on her way back. Placing each item beside the tub, she filled the cup with water and poured it along the back of El's head. As it tumbled down her prominent shoulders, her eyes rolled back and she smiled to herself. Joyce chuckled at this, ecstatic that El was enjoying this luxury so much. It had sat at their disposal all their lives, and still, they mostly took showers. "Okay, close your eyes," she asked, pinching El's nose. After eyeing Joyce confusingly, she obeyed and the water was poured over the front half of her head. "I'm gonna wash your hair now, okay?"

"Okay." El nodded, watching as Joyce squeezed a dollop of shampoo into her palm, rubbing it between her hands. Eleven's eyes widened with surprise when the mixture began to foam and bubble, and she leant back when Joyce reached for her hair.

"What is it?" Joyce asked, following her gaze to her open hands. "Oh! This is shampoo. It's for cleaning hair," Joyce read the girl's expression; she was getting better at that, though some looks still confused her. A little tentatively, El leaned her head forwards as Joyce began scrubbing her scalp free of dirt. El's hair had grown a bit longer over the weeks, still *very* short, but not a buzz cut either. Joyce couldn't wait to adorn it with berets and flowers...that was if Eleven allowed her. While she was more than grateful for two sons, some locked-away section of her maternal heart longed to raise a daughter. The girl's eyes were closed in a worrying way as her eyebrows raised in the center. "Almost done, don't worry..." Joyce

assured her. "D-Does it hurt?" she asked, watching El's face contort with sadness. Her lips trembled and she sank lower in the tub until her chin was just grazing the surface. Tears dripped down her cheeks, mixing with the bath water.

This was what she'd missed...for so long. The water was warm...warmer than she'd felt in weeks, and even though Joyce was *scrubbing* her hair clean, there was that connection she longed for. Joyce was confused as the girl sobbed, slowly leaning into Joyce's arms. The woman embraced her unquestioningly as Eleven reached up to hold one of Joyce's hands against her head. She clung to the other one, slippery with shampoo. That was when Joyce understood.

"Oh...El. We missed you so much..." Joyce cooed as the girl cried, her body starved of human contact. "Did you miss us?" El could only nod, her breath unsteady with sobs and gasps. They held each other for a moment, and Joyce nearly forgot to finish cleaning her. She knew the water would cool soon...but she held onto the child a bit longer, unable to deny her starving arms and sad eyes.

Joyce knew that with time, things would get better. Eleven was undoubtedly intelligent, which meant she could learn. How to read... how to write...it would all be a tenuous process. Yet against all odds, they'd found her, so Joyce couldn't stop now. If they hadn't found her...she didn't want to think about that. It would've been devastating for both adults, for *everyone!* Joyce could breathe easy, *knowing* the hardest part was over. The road to recovery would be a treacherous one; long and winding with many rocks and potholes. She knew it was bound to stretch endlessly into the horizon...but it had only come after Hop and her had conquered *a mountain*. She didn't know how El had lived before all of this...and a part of her didn't want to. For now, they'd take baby-steps, holding the girl's hands as she braved the unknown intricacies of their world for the very first time.

Eleven stepped out of the water, the wraps on her feet tearing easily. Joyce folded her in a towel, using a smaller one to dry her hair. El noted how her skin felt softer and more sensitive, and she clutched the towel to her comfortingly. "Alright...are you hungry?" Joyce sighed, hands on her hips.

"...yes," Eleven replied, her voice shallow. Her eyes blinked slow and lazily and she opened her mouth in a deep yawn. As she did this she began to sway to one side a bit.

"...are you tired?" Joyce asked, a steadying hand on the girl's shoulder. She nodded slowly, and Joyce considered putting her to bed first. "Alright..." Joyce led the girl into her bedroom, fishing through her drawers for some clothes that would fit. Everything Joyce had would be too big for the thin girl so she sighed, pushing the drawers shut. "Okay, I'm gonna go and get you some clothes. I need you to stay *right here*," Joyce instructed. The girl nodded a little worriedly as Joyce rushed into Will's room. To her relief he was still asleep, tucked beneath his covers and breathing normally. As she fished about his drawers, she thought she saw his bedside lamp flicker on, then off. She stared at it for a whole minute, anxiously anticipating the next flicker...but it never came. Joyce was so fatigued; it could've been her imagination...at least, she certainly hoped it was. "Alright, put these on and you're all set," Joyce said after shutting her bedroom door. Eleven let the towel drop to the floor, slipping into the unimaginably soft sweats. Joyce helped pull a sleep-shirt over her head, buttoning the front in a motherly fashion. El was blinking more and more now, slower and slower. "Here," Joyce led her to the bed and El happily climbed in. "You can sleep here tonight. I'll just...sleep on the couch..." Joyce sighed in a tired fashion, lifting the covers. As she was putting the comforter over Eleven's frame, she stiffened and reared back, seemingly frightened of the thick blankets. "You wanna sleep on top of the covers?" Joyce asked, a bit perturbed by her action.

"Yes," she replied.

"...okay then," the woman shrugged, watching as El's head sank back into the pillow. Almost immediately her eyes were closing sleepily, and Joyce leant down to kiss her on the forehead. "Goodnight sweetie..." she whispered to the girl. Her lips pecked her cranium and El's eyes suddenly snapped open. *There was that thing again!* "I'll see you in the morning," Joyce promised, slowly shutting the door.

"Wait." Eleven sat up, realizing Joyce was leaving her. The woman froze, eyeing the girl worriedly. "...stay," El asked in a tiny voice, her eyes lonely and sad. She hoped it was okay to sleep besides

someone...she'd never done it before. El just didn't think she could handle one more night by herself.

"...okay," Joyce nodded, shutting the door behind her and approaching the bed. Without changing, she climbed onto the other side and laid flat on the mattress, the sheets beneath her body. El watched her happily, smiling at the woman gratefully. Before Joyce could bid her goodnight, El scooped closer and rested her head in the crook of Joyce's shoulder, clinging to her frame. They both remained awake for a few moments more, as if they were waiting for the other to let go or deny this gesture...but neither of them did. Eleven sighed with relief, closing her eyes and snuggling against Joyce's chest. A comforting hand rested against her head as Joyce smoothed her fingers through the girl's hair. "Goodnight hon..." she whispered, softly patting the already sleeping child. Joyce planned on remaining awake to fret long after Eleven drifted off to dream, but she found herself acclimating to the strange girl's presence.

Perhaps this could work and there was no need to worry. This was the way it should've been last November...and here was their second chance. Joyce sighed, her breath warm and soothing against the girl's scalp. The hectic day was over, and there were still scars to tend to, but a new life for the Byers' had just begun. And for the first time in a long time, the girl experienced a long-forgotten sensation, as warm and comforting as the steamy bathtub or a mother's embrace.

Hope.

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: \*notes irony of it being the **eleventh** chapter\* This chapter - I think - is appropriate as the eleventh one because I feel like, deep down inside we all want Eleven to be safe and happy. So here it is. I hope you guys enjoy. Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*

## 12. Patience

### Chapter Twelve – Patience

"Guys...I'm kinda nervous..." Dustin admitted as he pedaled his bike over a sloping hill. Hawkins Elementary slowly rose into view as the trio rode together, one body weaker.

Lucas sighed into the wind, rolling his eyes knowingly. "You're *always* nervous! It's so stupid! All we have to do is go up there and talk about the weather. And then we sit down and it'll be *over*."

"That's easy for you to say!" Dustin barked back, rolling to a stop before the bike rack. "You're making *me* read all the facts!"

"Mike, tell Dustin to stop being such a sissy!" Lucas turned to his distant friend. His dark eyes stood out against pale skin, absently gazing into the horizon. Lucas pushed his shoulder, "Mike!"

"Huh?!" he turned, eyebrows raised in alarm.

"Oh shit this is not good..." Dustin shook his head, his hands clasping behind it. "We have to make a presentation and Mike's not even focused..." his voice rose near the end of his statement, trailing off in a worried groan.

"Would you calm down?! It's *just* a presentation!" Lucas declared.

"But-!"

"Guys!" Mike broke in with an attention-grabbing shout. "We'll do *fine*! We just have to make sure Will brought the poster. *I'll* do most of the talking. Dustin, you can just...hold the poster with Lucas." Mike knew public-speaking was one of Dustin's greatest fears, mostly because of the way he pronounced certain words. Lucas just hadn't comprehended that part yet. While the curly-haired boy would talk *endlessly* amongst his trusted friends and teachers, he grew quite reserved around people he didn't know.

"We ALL have to say something," Lucas reminded them as they stood beside the three chained bicycles. They all nodded reminiscently,



Dustin's face growing solemn. Lucas forced his hands into his jacket pockets, "I'll point to the pictures and read the facts I guess..."

"That sounds like a good plan," Dustin acknowledged his initiative with a finger. "I can introduce the topics..."

"Yeah! Just look at Mr. Clarke the whole time and you won't be as nervous. See? We got this," Mike nodded, a relaxed smile crossing his face. His friends eyed him expectantly.

"...what are you gonna say?" Dustin asked as Lucas raised his brow.

"Oh!" Mike blurted out. "...well...I could explain the theories after Lucas states the facts..."

"Yeah..." Lucas nodded, grinning to his friends. "Now THAT sounds like a plan!"

"We have to save some stuff for Will to say too. So he gets the credit," Dustin said, watching as their friend biked over the slight hill.

"He can summarize the project. Will's good at that sort of thing," Mike noted. As the shortest boy arrived besides them, he silently placed his bike in the fourth slot, connecting it to the chain Lucas brought each morning.

"Hey man! You got the poster?" Lucas asked. Will's friends eyed him as he caught his breath, and an odd apprehension swept over them. He coughed into his sleeve, squeezing his eyes shut. They knew he'd been sick for a while after his rescue...but in a few weeks' time Will had made a full recovery. Right now, his breathing sounded like he'd returned to square one.

"You okay?" Mike asked when Will finished hacking into his arm. The boy nodded, swallowing unnervingly.

"Holy shit...you're really sick aren't you?" Dustin noticed the difference in his pallor and creased his brow.

"Why'd you come if you weren't feeling good? You *know* your mom would've let you stay," Lucas questioned.

"I didn't want to make you guys wait..." Will said, his voice scratchy and thin. His friends all expressed their confusion through various looks and stares.

"...we'll just tell Mr. Clarke that you...lost your voice," Mike suggested. "You can hold up the poster with Lucas. We'll do all the talking." Will hated not being able to contribute during group projects. Mr. Clarke had told them to divide and conquer, then collaborate their knowledge and enrich the class. Lucas had studied with Dustin while Mike had gathered info from the library with Will. Still, he didn't want his friends to think he didn't care enough to contribute, not to mention the points he'd lose if Mr. Clarke saw him stay silent.

"Okay...well, I finished the poster," Will opened his backpack, extracting a log of rolled paper. As he removed the rubber band it unfurled in the wind, and they stood in awe at Will's artwork. Thick, puffy clouds that looked scarier than the ones overhead. Rain drops that shimmered in the glimpses of sunlight. Grass and trees, all colored in a deep, rich green; Will had even added texture to the bark of all the trees. "I hope it's okay..." Will stated bashfully, shuffling his toes about.

"Holy crap..." Dustin mused, gazing at the grey-colored sky.

"What?!" Will asked worriedly, glaring at the drawing. Mike chuckled, hiding his smile with a hand.

"Are you kidding?" Lucas asked. Will eyed him alarmingly. "He's joking right?"

"Guys!" Will pleaded, refolding the picture and bowing his head in shame.

"I don't know Will...that picture is just so atrocious..." Mike remarked, unable to pretend any longer. They all burst with laughter as Will watched, realizing they'd masterfully busted his chops.

"You guys suck..." Will sighed, walking ahead of them into the school. They tailed him, chuckling and playfully shoving his shoulders.

"You actually thought one of your drawings was *bad*?" Dustin giggled.

"He thinks that about ALL his drawings, even though they're basically masterpieces..." Lucas playfully shoved him as Will tapped him back.

"You should really go into art! You'd be really good at it," Mike encouraged the grinning boy.

"OOH! You should draw portraits of us!" Dustin suggested, flipping his hair about playfully. They all giggled at this as their friend smiled a toothless grin.

"Sorry Dustin, I don't think I'm good enough to capture all of your curls," Will joked, nodding tiredly at his friend's hair.

"Yeah, you gotta tame those things man...you look like *Medusa* in the morning!" Lucas poked him, snickering loudly as Mike and Will chortled to each other.

"Hey!" Dustin whined, eyeing Lucas' haircut. "At least my hair *has* curls!" Lucas glared at him a moment, then broke out into laughter as they pushed and shoved each other. As their horseplay grew rougher, the bell rang and the massive herd of children began walking into the open doors. Lucas had Dustin in a headlock, his hat falling to the ground as Mike hastily split them up. Will handed Dustin his hat as the roughhousing boys chuckled, half-smiling half-glaring at each other.

"Come on guys! They're gonna think you're fighting for real!" Will giggled, his mind suddenly shifting in a sickening fashion. A sharp intake of air was their only warning, and as Lucas and Dustin separated, they gazed worriedly at him.

"Mike...what's with Will...?" Lucas pointed. Mike turned over his shoulder to see a look of terror crossing Will's face. They'd never seen him like this, his eyes unnaturally wide and his brow raised in extreme alarm. The color leached from his skin and he stood, trembling and staring far beyond them.

"Will?" Mike stepped up to his friend, eyeing him sternly. Their faces were a couple inches apart, yet Will maintained a hundred-yard stare,

his breathing accelerated. Mike touched his friend's shoulder only to have his hand harshly shoved away. Lucas and Dustin watched in horror as Will fell backwards, seemingly terrified of their mutual friend. He began shouting and yelling at random objects, turning to see them only to jump back in terror. A crowd formed as they watched the confusing display. *Did Mike shove Will like he shoved Troy? Was that why he was on the ground?* None of them could fathom what Will was seeing.

The clouds had descended, swirling about him like fog on a murky day. They hung low in a choking mixture of poisonous gas and Will coughed after every inhale. Somehow between breaths there was allotted oxygen for him to scream at each disaster he saw. Birds with their heads on backwards and their wings plucked of feathers, eerily squawking his way. Squirrels whose bleeding eyes were too large for their heads, their mouths filled to the brims with razor-sharp teeth. Parts of the earth caved in around the part-time wizard, and he searched about helplessly for his missing friends. He wanted to shout their names into the chasm, but his throat had closed up in fear. Besides, he was certain the only reply he'd get would be the echo of his own voice reverberating off the moldy school walls. The moon hung high and green in the sky, dripping with a substance akin to vomit. A roar shot through the fog and Will's heart leapt into his throat. He slammed his eyes shut, crouching into a ball and whimpering into his knees.

"WILL! Will what's wrong?!" Mike shouted, shaking Will awake. All three boys crouched around him, their hands acting as oblivious anchors to this world. He coughed violently, curling over onto himself.

They overheard the principal barking orders at the stunned onlookers, "What's going on here?!" Russel Coleman had initially expected a fight, but he hadn't noticed anyone jeering or pointing. The silence was off-putting for a bunch of pre-teens crowded together like this, and a few of them actually eyed him worriedly. His stomach clenched and he quickened his pace. Before the principal pushed his way through the crowd, Will hacked something onto the sidewalk. Luckily, his friends' bodies acted as walls, blocking the tiny slug from the crowd's view...but Will was struck with the reality that he could

no longer hide from his friends. They finally saw the cause of his sickness and were horrified and disgusted and worried for him all at once.

"UGH!" Dustin and Lucas groaned, eyeing the wriggling slug. Will's coughing was loud and harsh as he desperately tried to form words.

"Guys..." Will choked, reaching out for them, gesturing wildly to a bucket and back to the slug.

"What?!" Lucas asked.

"Get the bucket!" Mike yelled, taking it from Lucas and pushing it into Will's outstretched arms. They all expected him to vomit into it, but they watched as Will flipped it upside down, then *slammed* it on top of the slug, effectively trapping it. This also hid it from the principal's view, who was now standing over them.

"Boys! What's going on here?" Principal Coleman demanded. He saw Will painfully hacking into his sleeve. The three friends eyed him helplessly, shooting to their feet and all speaking at once.

"I don't know but-"

"He's REALLY sick and-"

"He needs to go home! Right now!" Mike said at last, shoving both his friends a little harshly. "We can-!"

"BOYS! Boys! One at a time!" the principal shouted. Mr. Coleman knelt down before Will, shifting the bucket three inches to the right. They watched as Will eyed it worriedly, awkwardly *slamming* his hand onto the top and coughing into another clenched fist.

"What the hell was that?" Lucas hissed at Mike. Dustin eyed him just as confusingly.

"Will doesn't want anyone to see it..." Mike whispered, stressing each word beneath his breath. The two turned and carefully watched the principal's movements.

"Can you speak?" the man asked. Will shook his head, wheezing

painfully between each burst of air. His friends looked on, each of them experiencing a different kind of fear as Coleman tried to make sense of the situation.

"He needs to go home *now*," Mike reiterated, knowing Will needed help they couldn't offer. But he *knew* Will's mom would know exactly what to do, "We can take him-"

Russel stood, striding into the building and shouting over his shoulder, "I'm going to call an ambulance. *Stay with him!*" Mike rolled his eyes, as if they would *ever* desert him. The boys returned to the cemented path, crowding around their friend.

"Deep breaths buddy...you're okay," Dustin lightly tapped his back.

"He's not okay! Does he even *look* like he has enough air to take deep breaths?" Lucas argued, shoving Dustin's hand away. Their reactions clashed with each other like fire and ice, but their anxieties all stemmed from the same cause, linking them amidst their differing opinions.

Mike tried to ignore them, capturing Will's reddened eyes, "That *thing*...do you want us to make sure no one sees it?" Will hastily nodded, his breathing shallow and labored. "Okay..." Mike exhaled, his anxiety gripping him in its own special way. "...should we keep it for you to look at later?" Will eyed him for a moment, an uncertain glimmer hiding beneath those hazel eyes. Eventually Will nodded, and Mike grabbed the bucket, peeking beneath it. The slug writhed about maniacally, so Mike used the edge to scoop it up and slapped a folder of his on top as a makeshift lid. He held the bucket out to Dustin and Lucas as they eyed each other expectantly.

"...go ahead!" Lucas offered, a hand covering his grimace.

"Oh you gotta be shitting me..." Dustin groaned, reluctantly taking the bucket with both hands. They heard sirens approaching in the distance and prepared themselves for another day in the hospital. The moment Will escaped the confines of his backpack, he pushed it towards Mike, pointing to the poster poking from the top.

"What?! We're not gonna present without you!" Mike exclaimed,

taken aback by this suggestion. Will gave him a tired look as his friends all chimed in.

"Yeah! Mr. Clarke will understand," Dustin agreed as Lucas nodded peremptorily

"We'll wait," Lucas promised, eyeing their friend sternly. After a moment of silence, Will smiled at them all gratefully, suddenly wrenching over to cough into his knees. Mike peered back at his party, knowing they had some *serious* studying to do the moment they returned home.

The three of them glared at the bucket and Dustin peered up to say, "Well...at least now we won't have to dissect baby cats!" Mike and Lucas shared a grimace as Will slowly began to recover.

As chaos unfolded across town, Eleven sat awkwardly on one of Joyce's dining room chairs, peering about the kitchen curiously. "Alright! Breakfast's almost ready," Joyce announced with a sweeping of her hands. The smell of pancakes drifted throughout the room and El's stomach growled. Her mouth filled with a nameless liquid that always came whenever she felt especially ravenous. Joyce had poured a liquid of some kind onto a hot pan and to Eleven's amazement it had *solidified* into fluffy golden circles. Then she'd poured *another* liquid into a cup and placed it before the girl. It was stark white with a few frothy bubbles floating near the top. When El touched the glass, she found that it was almost ice cold. "Oh, go ahead and drink that. That's called *milk*," Joyce informed the curious girl. After flipping the pancakes onto two plates, Joyce turned to see a white mustache gracing the girl's lip, a satisfied look on her face. "Do you like it?" she asked with a chuckle. El nodded, wiping her lip with a hand. A stack of three flapjacks were placed before her, then another set across from her. Nervously checking the clock, Joyce urged the girl, whose eyes asked for permission. "Dig in!" she said with a smile.

El blinked twice, looked down at her plate and took a flapjack in both hands; she then promptly began eating it like a sandwich. "Oh... hang on there..." Joyce had only started cutting hers so she got up and leant over the small girl. El had a guilty look as she nervously watched the woman. Joyce took the knife and fork in both hands and

showed El how to cut them. After cutting two, she let El try the last and saw that she was actually pretty good at it! "That's...*usually* how we eat pancakes. It's just...something people do," Joyce tried to explain, returning to her seat. Now that El's pancakes were completely cut, she took a piece in her fingers and ate it, watching Joyce from the corner of her eye. The woman sighed, sinking back into her chair and shaking her head. Eleven picked up on this and she eyed Joyce in confusion. "We'll...w-we'll work on that tonight..." Joyce nodded, smiling tiredly at the hungry child. Eleven smiled back, this one warmer than all the others.

She hadn't realized it yet, but something in Eleven knew this was special...this ceremony known as *breakfast*. The girl had never participated in such communions known as mealtimes, and she'd only ever eaten a few times with someone else in the room. It had mostly been Mike, sharing his meals and snacks with her. She recalled when he'd urged his friends to save their meatloaf, and it had been the *second* best thing she'd ever eaten, but the time she'd spent with him had been much more meaningful than the scrumptious food. Now she sat with Joyce, and they were both eating the *same* food at the *same* time. To her, this time right now was sacred and some kind of holy.

"Oh shoot..." Joyce eyed the clock as Eleven turned to look with her. "I've got to get to work..." she mumbled worriedly, knowing she'd have to leave the girl alone. She began washing her empty dish in the sink as El finished her plate and stood behind her, looking up at the woman curiously. Joyce flicked her hands dry, wiping them against her pants. She turned to face the girl, "I'm going to have to leave for a couple hours. I have to go to work because *of course* Jeffrey couldn't have covered me..." she said with a heated sigh. Joyce proceeded to take El's plate and washed it clean.

"Jeffrey?" Eleven asked, thoroughly dumbfounded. She wondered if she should've known this person...

"Oh...he's just somebody I work with...don't worry," she said with a wave of her hand. "The next person who should be walking through those doors will be Will. And if it isn't...here-" Joyce hurried off to fetch a paper and pen. She jotted down the number for her job and slipped it into Eleven's hands. Pointing to their yellow phone, she instructed, "You just push each of those numbered buttons with these



numbers on it *once* and wait to hear a voice. Then you ask for me, okay?" Eleven eyed her pleadingly, hoping she'd decide to stay. *How could she ever remember all of that?!* "Oh I know...I know...it's gonna be *okay*. You met Will, right? As soon as he gets home you go to him. And if Jonathan comes home first, that's fine too..." Joyce trailed off. El's face only grew more and more frightened at the prospects. Joyce sighed, eyeing the floor, then looking back up to her; she didn't know if she could deny that face...but she'd done this before with two young boys. Lonnie hadn't really stuck around to watch them, so occasionally she had to leave them home by themselves; babysitters didn't work for free. The only difference was that her sons had always looked forward to being home alone, giddy with mischievous excitement. Eleven seemed petrified at the very thought of being alone. "Honey, I know this is scary but it's *only* for a couple hours... Will should come home when this long arm on the clock covers three and the little one points to fifteen," Joyce walked up to the clock and pointed each number out. She returned to her, gripping her shoulders, "El, I *know* you can do this. I *promise*." El's mind practically burst with memories and she felt horrible and scared and sad all at once. *How did Joyce know? What if this was just like last time?* Joyce hugged her, encompassing the girl with her arms and patting her back reassuringly. "It's okay...you've got nothing to fear..." Joyce tried to console her. She was already five minutes late. If she got fired, they'd sink in debt for the house and the cars...and she wouldn't be able to feed them. "I'll see you when I get back, okay?"

"Okay..." El breathed, nodding a little nervously. She watched Joyce go, exiting the front door and locking it behind her. For a moment, El stood in the same spot, trying to remember everything Joyce had told her. Once she'd locked it in, El began gingerly wandering the house, being *way* nosier than she needed to be.

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: Thanks so much for reading and all the reviews and support you guys have given this story. I hope you liked this chapter! Follow for more and tell me what you think, good or bad! Keep on writing! -Nightlock

## 13. Leverage

### Chapter Thirteen – Leverage

Curious hands sifted through Will's toy-box, noting the numerous figurines and action figures that lay within. Coincidentally enough, she peered at his bedside table to spot Will's wizard piece. It was what he used to represent himself during the boys' games; in the realm of Dungeons and Dragons, he was Will the Wise. She was able to recognize this as his and chose not to disturb it. El opened the drawer, spotting a thin floppy book with no spine. It was *very* bright with colors and enormous bubble letters and numbers spelling out *The Uncanny X-Men*. She couldn't understand the words, even if she tried, but the numbers one, three and four sat clearly decipherable in the top left corner. Eleven was more engrossed with the woman on the front. *She looks angry*, the girl thought, placing the comic back into the drawer. An amber bottle gained her attention and she recognized its shape and size. She opened it – there was no child safety cap – and smelt the fruity vitamins, recognizing the distinct scent. Flashbacks raced into El's mind. She knew what vitamins were...she knew all too well. Her eyes closed and suddenly she was back home...her *first* home...

*"Eleven...are you awake?" His voice was unnaturally soothing for such a tall, unsettling man. He shook the girl's shoulder gently as she clutched her stuffed animal, sitting up to greet him. "It's time for your vitamins," he said, opening the child safety cap and pouring two into his palm. As he extended them to her in the cup of his hand, she nervously took the fruit-flavored pills. They were chalky and crunched easily between her teeth.*

*"Thank you Papa..." Eleven said, after swallowing the supplements. To her they were the closest thing to candy she'd ever had. Brenner nodded, knowing exactly why she needed to take them every morning. Raising her indoors meant no one would come looking and their work would remain perfectly secluded. Unfortunately, there were some unwanted side effects that came along with never seeing the sun or feeling the grass. Her limited diet kept her from consuming the normal-intake of a wide range of vitamins, and if they wanted her to be strong and dangerous, she needed to be maintained. "Papa?" Eleven asked as he was exiting the room.*

*He turned to stop in the doorway, "What is it Eleven?" Her curiosity sometimes enraged him...another downside of working with a child.*

*"How long?" she asked.*

*"Until bath?"*

*"...until bath," she confirmed. He approached the bed, leaning over to make eye contact with the girl.*

*"Not much longer now...just a few more hours and it'll be ready," he informed her. She looked hesitant and doubtful, afraid to botch this test like she had the last. "Don't worry...just stay in here," he touched her cranium, nodding and smiling to her. "Stay in here and you'll do just fine." How could she? It was where she'd first seen it, and staying in there was the **last** thing she wanted.*

*"But Papa-"*

*"Now Eleven...I know you can do this..." he walked off towards her door. "You're very strong," he complimented, his hand on the door frame. He remembered finding her after she'd killed Nick and Henry...she hadn't looked very strong then. Nevertheless, she'd done it, and after the cat, it was everything they thought she couldn't do. "You're going to do this." His voice was an impassionate determination and it shamed her. "We have no time for fear...because we know what fear does, don't we?"*

*Eleven peered back up at him as he crossed the room, awaiting an answer. "...weak..."*

*"Yes. Fear makes us weak. With fear we are helpless...and so we must do what..." he trailed off, allowing her to fill in the blank.*

*"...kill it?"*

*"Yes," he smiled, nodding proudly. It was something he'd instilled in her and it had finally stuck. "If we don't kill our fears, they will do what..."*

*"...kill us..." she responded, fearing her own words. He nodded, tapping her gently on the cranium and exiting the room. Alone again, she laid on her side, clutching her animal and hoping a few hours would take longer than she imagined.*

The phone rang and Eleven jumped, staring into the hallway with shock. She ran towards the noise, stopping to peer around the corner and survey the room. It was empty (as it had been) so she proceeded to approach the phone. The ring was loud and came in separate bursts, and Eleven could only stare at it. She'd used a phone before... listened to the humming of one at least. Slowly and cautiously, her hand edged towards the earpiece, lifting it gingerly off of the receiver and holding it to her ear. There was a silence as the voice on the other end awaited a greeting. She waited too...for what, she didn't know...but then a male voice made her flinch again.

"...Joyce? Are you there?" Eleven dropped the phone and it clanked against the table and carpet, rushing to hide behind the couch. A voice...*Joyce had told her to wait for a voice, then ask for her.* The girl peered from the back of the sofa, her eyes wide with alarm. She could hear the voice in the distance, muffled by the carpet, "Joyce? Joyce it's Hopper...hello?!" He was starting to sound aggravated, so she returned to the phone, picking it up and holding it to her ear a second time. Hop was about to hang up when he heard breathing on the other end, soft and feminine. "...Eleven? Is that you?" The breathing stopped and he prepared to have his ears burst with noise at the drop of the phone, baring his teeth and grimacing. Instead, there was a silence...then the simplest of replies.

"Yes."

"It's Hopper...remember me from last night?" he asked, lowering his voice. Callahan and Powell were in the very next room and he *did NOT* want their input as to what he'd just said.

"Yes..." Eleven nodded, sitting cross-legged beside the tiny table that held the phone.

"Okay...good," he sighed in relief. Then he remembered his reason for calling, "Is Joyce there with you?"

El lowered her gaze at this, "No."

There was a stunned silence on Hop's end, "Are you there by yourself?"

The child nodded, nearly forgetting to say the word, "Yes." Hopper rubbed his head as he shook it regretfully. *Whose idea was that?!*

"Where is Joyce?" Hopper asked, forgetting the obvious answer.

"...work..." El recalled, pulling the slip of paper from her pocket. All ten digits stood out in a thin, black ink.

"Okay..." he groaned into the receiver. El raised her eyebrows at this, wondering what the issue was. "Well...I called to let Joyce know that Will is very sick...and that he's being kept in Hawkins General Hospital..." El took a moment to memorize this information. "Do you think you can tell her when she gets home?"

"Call her...?" El remembered Joyce's instructions. At this, Hopper hastily grabbed some random guy's insurance papers, flipped it onto its blank side and snatched a pen from an empty coffee cup.

"Yeah...can you read me the number for her work?" he asked the intelligent young girl. There was a silence on the other end as Eleven closed her eyes shamefully. "...El?"

"No..." Eleven shook her head.

"Just read me the number," Hop demanded, a little confused at her refusal. She kept quiet, feeling every negative stigma attached to this shortcoming of hers. "...El?!"

"I can't..." she confessed in a very disappointed voice.

"...you can't?" Hop repeated, wondering if she had simply forgotten what the number was. Then it hit him. *She really can't...*

"No..." she repeated, frowning into the earpiece and lowering the paper to her ankles.

"...oh," Hopper sighed, laying back into his chair, then sitting up again. He knew where Joyce was right now and how to get there... but he was worried about the youth on the other end of the line. "Okay...what I'm gonna do is go get Joyce from her job. I'll bring her to the hospital so she can see Will. I need you to stay there, alright?"

El nodded, "Okay..."

"I mean it...you can't leave for any reason..." Hop repeated, hoping she picked up on the severity of the situation. Will had been transported from the school and his oxygen levels had been *extremely* low for a young boy his age. Even with the medics helping him, the word was that he wasn't doing much better. And there was no reasonable diagnosis...not without Joyce there anyway. Will's lungs were so busy trying to breathe normally that words were beyond him. "Understand?"

"Understand..." El repeated.

"Okay, I'm gonna hang up now. Just put the phone back on the..." Hopper flinched as a SLAM rang in his ear as she dropped the phone back into the receiver. "God damnit..." he sighed, grabbing his car keys and heading out the door.

"Who was that Chief?" Callahan prompted, winking his way. He opened his mouth to continue but Hop cut him off.

"None of your damn business Cal." Powell snickered as Hopper spoke politely to Flo. "Hey, I've gotta get Joyce Byers from her job so she can see her kid. They're all tied up at the hospital trying to get information from him. The kid can barely speak..."

"I'll have anyone who calls leave a message then," Florence nodded sternly, understanding the rush.

"Thanks Flo," he said, hastily pushing open the doors. The officers and secretary all watched, a bit stunned by Hopper's promptness.

"Does he seem...*different* to you Flo?" Powell asked as Callahan gazed into the parking lot. Their coworker had always come off as well-to-do, but *extremely* laid back and reserved. The pale officer watched as Hop hastily reversed, then sped out and onto the main roadway. "He seemed *extra* happy this morning..."

"It's like he's actually in a hurry for something..." he mused in astonishment.

"Looks like it..." Flo observed. That was all she'd say concerning the

matter; she didn't want these two knuckleheads cracking jokes about him and Byers the WHOLE time he was gone, then clam up the second he got back. If they were truly curious, they'd figure it out themselves...but she hoped their combined stupidity might prevent that.

"Last time he was in this big of a rush was...geez I can't even remember when..." Callahan pondered out loud. Flo sighed in quiet relief.

*"Is Joyce there with you?"*

*"No."*

*"Are you there by yourself?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Where is Joyce?"*

*"...work..."*

"Sir, we believe we've found something important. We'd like you to listen." A finger pressed the replay button as he placed the cushioned headphones over his ears.

*"...Joyce? Are you there? Joyce? Joyce it's Hopper...hello?!"*

He eyed them skeptically until Hopper continued.

*"...Eleven? Is that you?"*

A pause as he strained his ears to listen.

*"Yes."*

He set the headphones onto the desktop, nodding at them affirmatively, "It's her."

"Do you want us to proceed with the extraction? She is alone...it would be simple and quick..."

"No...not yet..." he rubbed his chin. He knew how dangerous she

could be...but if *they* knew how many people she'd killed, there was no telling if they'd stay. To them, she was a helpless, institutionalized twelve-year-old girl and that was it...but to Brenner, she was so much more. "Keep monitoring the phone lines...we need more leverage for this to work..."

"Yes sir." The scientists bustled about, some returning to their seats to eavesdrop, others striding back into the hallway. Brenner simply stood, his hands splayed against the desktop, his mind hatching a dangerous new plan. He grinned, chuckling to himself. Even in its earliest stages it was airtight. It was foolproof.

The bell rang and nearly every student immediately rose to their feet. Nancy had a hard time collecting her books so she took a moment to do so. The moment she exited the classroom, she saw Steve leaning against the opposite wall, waiting for her. She shook her head and continued down the hall as he pursued her. "Nancy!" he called, anger rising in his voice. As the rest of the student body carried on, eager to get home, she stopped, turning to face him. He strode up to her, his hands in his pockets and a stern look on his face. "Two days...you know I think that's a record..."

"Leave me alone," Nancy demanded, pushing past him. He gripped her arm, swinging her back to face him a little roughly.

"Hey! How long are we not gonna talk to each other? Frankly it's a little ridiculous," he stated, watching her expression change from shock to anger.

"No!" she tore her arm from his grasp and a few people turned their heads. "You know what's ridiculous?! What you said! There were people there who *knew* her Steve! *I knew her!*" she exclaimed, pointing declaratively. Steve broke eye contact, tapping his foot and shaking his head in ignorance. Nancy could see Barb's locker just behind him, and for a moment she imagined her standing right there...watching with everyone else. Suddenly her throat closed in sorrow and she shook her head, her eyes watering and her voice breaking, "How could you?"

Steve watched her walk off, ponytail swinging angrily. "Nancy..." She didn't stop so he rushed after her, trying to grab her a second time.



"Stop it Steve!" her voice rose above the normal hallway banter and now *everyone* was watching. "We're done! It's over!"

"I'm sorry," Steve tried to apologize but she was already walking away. As the multitudinous onlookers gazed absently at Steve, he shook his head, hands returning to his pockets. He retreated down the hall, in the opposite direction.

At the moment, she couldn't stand herself. *Why couldn't I keep it together? I was angry, so why did I feel sad too?!* Nancy hated showing her vulnerability during situations like that...then again, she hadn't been in many of those situations in the first place. Confrontation was an art she was only beginning to practice and she thought back to November of last year. *I should've slapped him...*no. There were too many people...she didn't want to embarrass Steve like he'd embarrassed her before out of blind anger. She wanted him to know he'd been an insensitive ass Saturday night and that he'd crossed a line. Hell, he'd basically stomped it into the dirt, and he never once admitted that he'd done anything wrong. As she shook her head, considering all of this she eyed her locker. Butterflies and hearts adorned the inside and she considered tearing them off. She couldn't do that...not now. They still brought her a tiny semblance of comfort, and the butterflies reminded her of Barb. Monarchs had been her favorite. Nancy shut her locker, exiting the school and heading towards the buses. She stopped, watching the last one just leaving the furthest point of school grounds and she sighed. Looking around, she spotted Steve's BMW, rolling out of the parking lot and approaching her. She wasn't about to ask for a ride, and by the way the engine growled as he accelerated off, he wasn't about to offer one either. *Asshole...*

"Hey..." a familiar voice. She turned to see Jonathan Byers, his new camera slung around his shoulders. "Is...everything okay?" he asked. She marveled at how he could tell she was distraught and that checking on her was his first priority.

"Yeah..." she sighed, nodding and smiling a little tiredly. "It's been a long day..."

"Oh...I get that," he chuckled with her. When their laughter died down, he asked, "Do you wanna talk about it?"

"Not really...I, kinda just wanna head home..." she admitted, hoping he wouldn't take it personally.

"Okay," he nodded. He understood not wanting to talk about things; he understood that *perfectly*. "So um...do you need a ride?" he offered. He knew he had the only car in the household right now. But he also knew Joyce's Ford Pinto should be repaired by now; the mechanic had promised it'd be done by Monday. Raindrops tapped them gingerly, foreshadowing a downpour. "It might rain soon..." Jonathan looked up at the sky.

"It's raining right now..." Nancy corrected him.

"What? No...this is drizzling..." Jonathan smiled, casually disagreeing with her in the name of good humor. The rain suddenly began falling harder and faster and they squinted their eyes to keep the water out. "Okay...okay *now* it's raining!"

"A ride sounds nice actually..." she said, shielding her head with a folder.

"Okay good...I didn't want to leave knowing you'd have to walk home in this weather," Jonathan mused as Nancy laughed. "Wasn't Steve here today?" he asked, remembering his overcompensation in gym class. Nancy went quiet for a moment and he suddenly remembered talking to Steve at his job. "...I'm only asking because, he usually takes you home..."

"It's okay," she assured him, shaking her head. "Steve and I are... taking a break..." she confessed, climbing into Jonathan's car. She smelled a hint of lingering cigarette smoke and eyed him curiously.

He smelt it too and actually sniffed again in confusion, "Oh! That's my mom...she must've smoked in here recently..." Nancy frowned as Jonathan shifted gears. "...I don't smoke, I promise."

"I know," Nancy rolled her eyes.

"Sorry for asking...about Steve. I didn't mean to-"

"Jonathan," she cut him off as he rolled onto Maple Street. "It's *okay*. You can ask about Steve," she reassured him.

He smiled a little nervously, "Okay. Sorry..."

"Stop apologizing!" she snapped as they both burst into chuckles.

"Okay..." Jonathan grinned, biting his lip. He nearly did it again and she watched him adoringly. She noticed how attractive he looked whenever he smiled.

"Hey...can I ask you something?" Nancy began.

"Sure."

"...remember last year when we were too scared to sleep by ourselves?" she asked. His heart nearly leapt into his throat. It was *beyond* ironic that she was talking about that time, with everything that had happened last night. The girl, his brother getting sick, Hopper's secrecy...for a moment he had to sift through all of today's troubles so he could recall yesterday's in a brighter light...and when he finally recovered that memory, he chuckled to himself.

"Yeah...I remember that..." They both smiled and Nancy pondered it, realizing something. Somehow, in some miraculous way, the memory struck her as oddly intimate. It was strange – considering all the times she'd been that close (or closer) to Steve – how such an innocent act of sharing a bed purely for sounder sleep could strike her as an act of intimacy. A part of her wondered if Jonathan felt that way too...

"That was *crazy*..." she mused, breaking the silence and initiating the laughter.

"Yeah, it still is..." Jonathan accidentally spoke up.

"What?" Nancy asked, eyes widening at his words.

"Huh...? Oh! Nothing..."

"No...no you said something..." Nancy pressed, eyeing him suspiciously.

"I said yeah..." he lied.

"You said something else too though," she squinted at him as they rolled to a stop in front of her house. She could see Mike, Lucas and Dustin on their bikes out of the corner of her eye, but she kept her focus *locked* on Jonathan Byers.

"No I..." Jonathan sighed, *wishing* he could tell her. It was Nancy! He could trust her, right? Even though Hopper had forbid it, he felt Nancy was someone he could trust...he was sure of it. "It's... complicated..." he began.

"I've got time," Nancy offered, eager to understand his cryptic remark. The rain slapped loudly off the top of the Ford, coating the tires in a clear sheen. She didn't understand why he was taking this long to tell her.

As she observed Jonathan's odd hesitation, he started off by asking, "...do you remember Eleven?"

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: Come on! I HAD to make something bad happen in the **thirteenth** chapter. Halloween is almost here! At least...in reality it is...*anyway*, I sincerely hope you're enjoying this story. If you are, follow for more and tell me what you think! Keep on writing! - *Nightlock*

## 14. A Steel Trap

### Chapter Fourteen – A Steel Trap

All three boys stood around the flipped bucket, eyeing it worriedly. Silence hung about them as they wondered what to do next. "...we should probably check to see if it's still there..." Lucas suggested, walking up to it slowly.

Mike grabbed his hand, "Wait!"

"What?!" Lucas jumped.

"I was just thinking that we should be careful with it...I mean... whatever *it* is, it was making Will sick like that," Mike explained. Lucas eyed him, turning to glance back to the bucket. "We shouldn't touch it...just in case..."

"How are we gonna dissect it if we *don't* touch it?" Dustin prompted.

"Why are you so focused on *dissecting* it?!" Lucas rebuked.

"Because! How else are we supposed to tell what it is?!" Dustin shot back. Lucas rolled his eyes as Mike gazed at the floor.

"I thought we were gonna wait for Will so he could-"

Dustin cut Mike off, "Right now, Will is *way* too sick for this. He probably doesn't want to even see that thing ever again, especially if this has been happening more than once." Lucas and Mike nodded understandably. "Think about it, we'd be doing Will a favor..."

There was a slight pause until Lucas admitted, "He has a good point... I mean, if *I* was puking up those things, I'd *NEVER* wanna see a snail ever again..."

"It's a slug..." Dustin corrected. The dark-skinned boy glared at him disbelievingly. "It *is*!"

A frustrated Lucas gestured with his hands, "I don't care *what* it is! I just don't want it to be bugging Will anymore!"

"I think we all want that," Dustin reassured him, stepping lightly towards the bucket. Mike and Lucas watched him alarmingly as he stood directly beside it, looking down at the blue plastic. "...okay..." Dustin trailed off, stepping back a bit. "If we're gonna do this, we need to be *ready*." After a moment's confusion, the boys nodded comprehendingly, immediately splitting up and searching Mike's house. Lucas was lucky and found a few garden gloves in Mike's garage. Dustin had trekked up all two flights of stairs to uncover a couple HUGE pairs of sunglasses from Nancy's room. Mike was finding those hospital masks that went over the nose and mouth, tearing apart his family's bathroom. A lightbulb went off in his head, and he rushed into Nancy's room only to find Dustin trying on one of the huge glasses. They were thick, round and white framed and he turned to see Mike standing in the doorway. "What?" They both heard the front door open and looked at each other frightfully.

"Go downstairs!" Mike ordered in a hushed whisper. Dustin nodded, slipping the gaudy glasses into his jacket sleeve and walking out of the room. Nancy couldn't miss him on the stairs, acting very peculiar...

She squinted at him, recognizing that look of guilt from someone else's face, "...were you, in my *room*?"

"NO," he exclaimed, racing the rest of the way into the basement. It almost sounded like he'd fallen down the stairs because he was going so fast.

Nancy rolled her eyes, stomping up the stairs and calling, "Mike? You better not be in my-"

There he was, crawling out from under her bed, her textbooks strewn across the floor. She stared at him in shock as he shook his head wonderingly at her. "You keep your textbooks *under* your bed? No wonder you're failing Calculus..."

"Mike...if you don't get out of here..." she warned, closing her eyes angrily. "I have to make a phone call!"

"I'm just trying to find your anatomy book! Can me and the guys borrow it?" Mike asked, sifting through the pile of textbooks.

"Why do you need my anatomy book...?" she asked, fishing in her bag for the thick-bound pages.

Mike shrugged, "Just for fun..."

"...ew," Nancy shuddered, knowing there were detailed close-ups of the human body on page twenty-four.

"...EW. We're using it for science class!" Mike returned her questioning glare.

"Whatever...just don't damage it. I need that tomorrow..." Nancy warned, placing the book into his open hands. Unable to wipe the grimace off his face, he simply nodded and rushed downstairs, clutching the book to his chest. She sighed, slowly shutting her door and leaning against the frame. Then she glanced at her phone, pulling a piece of paper from her jeans pocket. Jonathan's name was spelled out above a complete phone number and she wondered if he was home yet. They *needed* to talk about the shocking news he'd delivered...

"What the heck is that for?" Lucas asked, sporting a pair of fuchsia red glasses. Tiny gems adorned the corners and Mike had to cover his mouth to keep from laughing. Lucas tore them off and eyed him, "No seriously...what's with the book? I don't have any homework today and I'm not trying to..."

"It's an anatomy book..." Dustin observed as Mike snickered into his fist. "Good thinking Mike!"

"Yeah...sorry Lucas..." he gasped, shaking his head.

"Yeah yeah..." he pushed him, holding out a pair of pink shades. "Don't worry, *these* are yours." Dustin giggled out loud as Mike's smile slowly vanished.

"...fine..." he sighed, snatching them from Lucas' hand. Dustin already had all of his protective gear on as he reached for the bucket.

"WAIT!" Lucas and Mike both shrieked, hastily equipping their masks and gloves.

"Sorry...just excited is all..." Dustin apologized. Mike opened the anatomy book and tried to find the closest thing to body systems... but he hadn't realized this book strictly covered *human* anatomy.

As Mike flipped past page twenty-four they all cringed, releasing a collective groan of disgust. "Your sister has to look at that *in class*?"

Mike shook his head, "I know, it's so gross..."

"Well, she's still kind of a badass so she can probably handle it," Dustin began, gasping with remembrance. "*Remember when...?!*"

"Yes Dustin! We remember when she fought the Demogorgon..." Mike exclaimed, tossing the useless book onto the couch. "*Lucas* fought it too!"

The boy cleared his throat, pretending to bask in recognition, "Yes... yes I did..."

"Oh *please*! We all know El basically saved our asses!" Dustin reminded them.

"True...true..." Lucas nodded in agreement. Mike had no comment, curious as to how they could speak so openly about her. It hadn't yet struck him that they idolized the girl, and each of them missed her in their own special way. Rather than cage their sorrow inwards, they decided to express their appreciation and gratitude outwardly...well, at least Dustin did.

"Okay...are we all ready?" Dustin asked, extending his arms eagerly towards the bucket. The soft lighting of Mike's basement wasn't really the best for a dissection, but they'd have to make do. This had to remain hidden, like so many better parts of their lives had. It too, was a living being...

"Ready..." Mike nodded.

"Me too," Lucas leaned over the bucket, preparing to see it. Dustin nodded, grasping the bucket in his gloved hands and slowly lifting it up. The folder lay on the table before them...completely slug-less. They furrowed their brows in confusion.



"...where'd it go?" Dustin asked, holding the bucket on his shoulder like an Aquarius symbol. Mike and Lucas watched in horror as the slug clung to the inside of the bucket, dangling precariously above Dustin's shoulder.

"Dustin...don't move..." Mike got the book from the couch.

"OH GOD where is it?! You guys can see it can't you?!" Dustin shrieked, closing his shaded eyes and shivering with disgust.

"Stop it! We got this, just...*don't move!*" Lucas restated, stressing his words with outstretched hands. Mike extended the book so it hung just beneath the slug and the tiny black creature slipped onto the cover. Mike slowly returned the anatomy text to the table and they all gazed ominously at the slug.

"Oh thank god..." Dustin sighed, letting the bucket bounce against the floor.

"What even is it?" Lucas asked, lowering his shades to get a better view of the already dark creature.

"I don't know..." Mike trailed off, leaning towards it and squinting.

"...shit!" Dustin exclaimed. They gave him a look of alarm. "We forget to get a knife..."

"Okay...you *really* wanna cut that thing open?" Lucas checked in a skeptical tone. "What's that gonna do besides make a mess?"

"Well we can't just flush it down the toilet!" Mike reminded them. "It could mess with the water supply...it could make *everyone* sick!"

"It'd be just like *Zombie Holocaust*..." Dustin trailed off, widening his eyes.

"Your mom let you watch that?" Mike asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I may have...watched it when my parents, weren't home..." Dustin grinned toothily.

"Oh..." Mike nodded knowingly. "...was it good?"

"I liked it," Dustin stated as Lucas began anxiously leering around the room. "But there was this one part where the scientist..."

"Guys!" Lucas barked.

"What?!" Mike turned to eye the spot where the slug had been and flinched with fright.

"WHERE IS IT NOW?!" Lucas shouted, spinning about searching the floor near his feet.

"Oh my god shit shit shit..." Dustin rehearsed his most common freak-out lines, stumbling about the dimly-lit basement.

"I FOUND IT!" Mike yelled, grabbing it with his glove. All of them either groaned or shrieked as Mike approached the table, holding it as far from him as his arm could stretch. The way it writhed between his fingers nearly made him hurl, and he grimaced with disgust. He threw it back onto the book, forgetting that his sister needed to eventually use it. "Look...let's just get rid of it..." he said, sighing into a shudder.

"Yeah! What are we gonna see inside of that thing besides nasty black goo?" Lucas added, shrugging his shoulders disdainfully.

Dustin sighed, a little let down. Like the rest of them, he was intrigued with science and the way things worked. All he'd wanted was to see if he could make any groundbreaking discoveries about the slug during the dissection...but he saw his friends' points. The risk outweighed the slimmed chances of benefit, and he nodded, "You're right..." The other two seemed to calm at this, until Dustin brought up the obvious. "We should definitely get rid of it...but how?"

"I'm not sure..." Mike sighed. "We can't burn it because my parents might smell it..."

"Uh, yeah...plus that's just *really* messed up," Lucas eyed his friend questioningly as Mike rolled his eyes, preparing to explain. "Let's just...bury it or something..."

Dustin's face lit up, "We could throw it in the quarry!"

"No way! Then the animals and the wildlife will get sick from the water!" Lucas rebuked. Dustin sighed, shrugging his shoulders helplessly.

"Do you have a better idea?" They eyed Mike, who stood gazing spitefully at the wriggling creature.

"...we keep it somewhere for Will," he suggested, eyeing the creature suspiciously. Before his friends had time to counter this suggestion, Mike added, "He said he wanted us to keep it for him..." Mike noted. "Maybe...since it came from Will...he'll know the best way to get rid of it." His friends' gazes cast downwards as they contemplated this theory.

"Okay..." Lucas sighed. "Where are we gonna keep it until then?"

Dustin's face lit up a second time, "Guys! What if we froze it?" The other two eyed him, glancing hopefully at each other. "Think about it...if it dies during the freeze, then we won't feel bad cutting it open or getting rid of it. It'll already be dead! And if it lives, that'll be fine too! If we freeze it, it won't be able to go *anywhere*. It'll be completely trapped until Will is better," Dustin explained.

"Whose freezer are we gonna keep it in?" Lucas asked, hoping this simple question wouldn't botch Dustin's otherwise ingenious plan.

"My dad has a cooler he lets me keep science experiments in...I could put it in there and he wouldn't even ask about it!" Dustin offered, smiling in a broad fashion.

"I think we should do that," Mike said.

"Oh don't worry! I can smell a good plan when I hear it," Lucas nodded, grinning playfully to his friends. They chuckled at his oxymoron, watching as Dustin rose to his feet.

"I'll get a cup of water!" he threw over his shoulder, heading up the stairs. Lucas and Mike remained in a fairly good mood, smiling at each other for a bit longer. They had to give their friend more credit; while they were all deemed "voraciously inquisitive" by Mr. Clarke, Dustin never let them down as the idea guy. Sometimes, he was the

only one who could think of a plan at all!

"Hey Mike?"

"Yeah?" Lucas seemed oddly hesitant and Mike could tell something was up.

"...never mind..." Lucas changed his mind, shaking his head and waving a dismissive hand his way.

"Oh *come on!* You **always** do that!" Mike exclaimed. "Now you **have** to tell me!" He maintained his demanding stare even as they heard Dustin returning with the cup. If Lucas could talk to him about it, then Dustin had a right to hear it too.

"Nope...it's stupid. It'd kill the vibe," Lucas grinned mischievously to himself as Dustin placed the cup beside the book. Mike eyed him incomprehensively, wondering if what Lucas had to say was *about* their curly-haired friend.

"What would?" Dustin asked, glancing between them with eyes of blue.

"Nothing," Lucas shook his head carelessly. Dustin shrugged, seemingly oblivious to Mike's obvious frustration. The pale boy kept staring at his silent friend as Dustin picked the leech-like creature up, dropping it into the cup with a splash. They all reared away from the water in disgust.

"Sorry!" Dustin mumbled, carefully covering the top with aluminum foil. The moment he finished, he held the cup out victoriously. "There! All prepped for the cryo-chamber..." he said in a foreboding tone. Lucas and Mike couldn't help but grin and chuckle at this. If anything else, Dustin was also the master of references. "Say goodbye, Han Solo..." he added as his friends giggled helplessly.

"Mike!" Nancy called from above. He rolled his eyes, wiping the book with the end of his shirt and re-ascending the stairs reluctantly.

"I'll be back guys..." he groaned once near the top, meeting Nancy in the kitchen. She had a concerned look on her face, like she was confused about something she wanted to help with. "Hey..." he

stated, offering her the book. She took it, gazing off into the distance. "...everything okay?" he asked, eyeing her suspiciously. There began a long, drawn-out silence as Nancy battled within herself; was she going to be a better sister, or a better guardian to her younger brother? She'd been sworn to secrecy and she hated it! How could she not tell *him*, of all people?! Even though he'd lied about it, she *knew* how he might have felt for the girl...and maybe still does.

"...yeah! Everything's fine...I just...need to show you something important..." she said in a cryptic manner.

Mike eyed her skeptically, "Is this something Mom should see?"

"NO!" she practically shouted, causing Mike to jump. His eyes widened in alarming suspicion. "No...just you and...your friends..."

"Oh..." Mike nodded in a knowing fashion, turning to shout for the two boys.

"NOT...yet," Nancy grabbed his shoulder instinctively. "It's kind of...a secret..."

Now she'd truly piqued his curiosity, and he eyed her, asking, "What's going on?"

"I need to make another phone call...just hang on, okay?" Nancy retreated to her room, closing the door behind her. Mike was left very confused and slightly annoyed at the top of the stairs. His sister wanted to help him...but it meant keeping him in the dark for a few more minutes as she dialed the Byers' home. There was no reply, so she dialed again. Then again. Finally, on the fourth try, someone picked up the phone and Nancy held her breath. "...Jonathan?"

She could hear breathing on the other end of the line, then someone replied. "No."

Now, Nancy's mind wasn't a steel-trap; she was a regular high-school student going through a break-up, focused on classes and studying and whether she actually understood the intricacies of the periodic table. Right now it was March, yet only four months ago she'd forgotten all academia for a single week to *hunt a monster* that had

stolen her closest friend. She knew how Mike felt now...how much pain came along with losing someone so suddenly. Not to mention, he'd been through it *twice*. And all too quickly, it was like it had been four months ago, eternally etched into her memory. Her fears were revisiting her and so was the intrigue concerning this little girl...and there was *no* way she could forget about the danger. Jonathan had sounded worried in the car, making her promise not to tell *anyone*. But this was *Mike*, and Nancy knew he was one of El's only friends. *This would go against everything I said I wouldn't do...*

Just as she was doubting herself, a memory lodged itself into her consciousness, and she remembered how Mike had been the week after El had disappeared. Karen had made him waffles to cheer him up, but the instant he spotted them stacked in groups of three, his eyes watered and his face flushed red. He stormed off into the basement, deaf to his mother's sympathetic calls and his sister's sad, worried looks. They didn't speak about the girl for a whole week after that, and whenever the clock struck eleven he'd rush downstairs, secluding himself in the basement for a whole hour.

The logistical, multi-tasking part of her mind shoved *everything* to the ground and sharply focused on *that* voice and what it meant to her family, especially her brother. She spoke quietly, "I'm Nancy...Mike's sister..." Nancy distinctly heard a gasp of disbelief, albeit quiet and subdued.

"Mike..." she repeated, never thinking she'd hear or say the name again.

"Yeah...do you want to see him?" Nancy asked.

"Yes," El nodded hastily, shifting about anxiously beside the phone. Her pulse quickened and her pupils dilated of their own accord. It felt like her stomach was jumping about with some kind of electricity and her limbs twitched and vibrated, yearning to run to Mike's house right now, though she wasn't sure of the way.

"Okay...Jonathan can bring you here in his car..." Nancy began. Eleven sighed, her eyes closing regretfully slow. "Where Is Jonathan?"

Her hands unclenched and she sighed remorsefully into the earpiece,

"Gone..."

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: THANK YOU ALL SO MUCH FOR READING! I hope you've enjoyed the story this far! Follow for more and tell me what you think, good or bad! Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*

## 15. A Better Place

Authors Note: WAIT! Before you read I wanted to thank everyone who's left their thoughts on this story! It is EXTREMELY encouraging for someone who is quickly realizing she doesn't have as much time to write these chapters as she did before, even though she *loves* writing them more than life itself. Okay...that's a joke...kind of. Okay! Without further a do, *enjoy!*

### Chapter Fifteen – A Better Place

El stood before the fridge, glaring at it angrily. It hadn't stopped making this *annoying* humming noise since she'd last spoken to Hopper...and a careless part of her wondered if she could mute it. She focused on the giant humming rectangle. Surely she could...the last time she'd done this – well, before she'd thrown Hopper anyway – she'd been upside down (literally) and lasted a good ten seconds before passing out. El wasn't sure if she should though, since it appeared to be where the Byers' stored their food. Suddenly the front door opened and Jonathan peered in. Both kids made eye contact as Jonathan slowly closed the house behind him. "Hey," he offered a nervous greeting. El just stared at him blankly, remembering him from last night but not knowing him enough to trust his word. *This isn't Will...it's Joyce's oldest son, Jonathan*, she reminded herself. El knew not to expect anything from him, unknowingly assuming he was nothing like his brother. "So uh...do you want something to eat?" he noticed her planted before the fridge, her feet wrapped in loose bandages.

"...yes," she replied, eyeing the floor.

"Alright, let me show you how," he strode to her side a little hastily. He was in a hurry to get a call from Nancy so they could talk about the unthinkable when he noticed El's cautious stare; it was a bit off-putting and very out-of-place. Was she, **afraid**...of *him*? He didn't think anyone could *ever* fear him...then again, she wasn't just anyone. Jonathan sighed, removing one hand from the fridge door and extending it to her, "I don't think we've ever *actually* met..." She eyed him confusingly, glancing from his hand, then back up to him. Eleven remembered something like this from before...Benny had done the



same thing with his right hand on his last day. When she hadn't moved, he'd taken hers and clasped it in his own, and they both moved them up and down for a few cycles. She figured it was just one of those things they practiced, like eating together. "I'm Jonathan. Will's brother," he formally introduced himself. Cautiously, El reached for his larger hand, taking it and slowly moving it up and down. She did feel some kind of connection whenever she did this... but it was still very weird to her. Jonathan was tempted to laugh at how peculiar the girl was and how she blinked in wonder at the most mundane actions, but he didn't want to upset her. "So...is it okay if I call you Eleven?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, holding his hand way longer than necessary. Very awkwardly, Jonathan slowly disconnected their fingers and let go of her hand.

"Alright...well, if you're ever hungry, you can just go in here and grab whatever you want..." with a pull of his hand, the box swung open and a blast of cold air crashed into her bare toes. She curled them disagreeably, peering in at all the colorful, new edibles. Jonathan hastily picked up an egg, *"Except this...don't try to eat these or you'll get sick..."* She nodded, eyeing the smooth, white surface. It didn't look very appetizing anyway, reminding her of the smooth concrete walls of the facility. El tiredly blinked the flashbacks away, turning back to the fridge as Jonathan extracted a few items and let the door swing shut. "Sometimes...when you eat things by themselves they taste kind of...well, boring..." He was about to make her a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with their home-made bread when he stopped in his tracks. The teenager turned to ask, "Are you allergic to peanuts?"

Eleven eyed him hopelessly, replying with, "What are...*peanuts*?" She was about to ask about the word *allergic* as well when she noticed his reluctance.

Jonathan sighed, "They're these tiny brown things that people grind up to make into this." He held the jar out to her and she noted its interesting color. *If she doesn't know, then there's no telling...* "That's alright, you can just have something else..." She flinched as the caramel-colored jar left her sights and was returned to the cupboard. It didn't appear to be stinginess that kept Jonathan from feeding her

the stuff...El gathered that he was, *somehow* looking out for her. His eyes explored the fridge, glancing down every once in a while to notice her mostly watching him. "You can...pick something if you want," he offered, holding open the door. As she turned to eye the contents, she remembered something that had caught her attention earlier today and walked away from the fridge. She'd never seen it before, but nevertheless it stuck out like a sore thumb, hanging in their vegetable basket. "Oh...that's a tomato," Jonathan pointed at the bright red fruit.

"Is it...good?" El asked, struggling to remember the correct adjective.

"Well...not really on its own...but we can make it into sauces for spaghetti...or cut it up for salads..." he mused, reaching for the loaf of bread. Perhaps she'd have a sandwich just yet. "What I like to do is cut it into thick slices and pretend it's a burger," he said with a childlike smile. She smiled back, surprised at his carefree nature, despite not knowing what a burger was...along with all the other foods he'd just mentioned. He cut the roundish loaf into four thick slices, then got a jar of mayonnaise out and lathered all four pieces. El eyed the white substance forbearingly, only grimacing a tiny bit. Grasping a knife from a drawer, Jonathan cut the tomato and Eleven watched as it bled with each knife-stroke. The completed sandwiches were slapped onto two paper plates and Jonathan sat down at the table with her. "Oh! One more thing," he reached for her plate, lifting one slice of bread and sprinkling a pinch of salt onto the red fruit. "Okay, now it's ready," he smiled, sliding the plate back across the table. "It's actually pretty good, I promise." *There was that word again...* A little cautiously, she picked up the sandwich, seemingly waiting for him to do as well. When he bit into it, the red juices spilled down his chin and she copied his action, her eyes widening at the surprising onslaught of flavor. The tang of the tomato and the creaminess of the white stuff combined to form something sweet and beautiful, and the pinch of salt tempered the almost overbearing sweetness from the mayonnaise. Not to mention the body of the bread! Jonathan nodded, grinning to himself, "Told you."

She smiled back and decided that Jonathan was worth trusting. It may have been too soon for them to bond very well, but that was okay. Jonathan knew they had time. Eleven hadn't missed Will's

drawings while she'd nosed about his room. She'd found them vibrant and creative, and now she was starting to think that maybe Jonathan was a bit like Will after all...just different. They finished their meal in peace, gazing out at the spring sunshine. Eleven had spent another good bit of today peering through Will's bedroom window, marveling at the different kinds of plants she'd never gotten to observe. "Jonathan?" Eleven asked as he went about washing the dishes.

"What is it?"

"Will is sick..." she began, remembering that it was her duty to tell him.

"I know...but I think he's feeling better. He went to school, didn't he?" Jonathan replied, drying the knife with a rag. Eleven stayed silent and it concerned him. "Will should...actually be home right now..." Jonathan looked at the clock expectantly, returning the knife to its designated drawer. "Did he ever come back?" Eleven shook her head sadly making Jonathan's heart race as his mind flooded with troubling possibilities. "...d-do you know where he is?"

"...a hospital," Eleven retrieved from her memory. "...Hawkins, general..." At this Jonathan nearly took off, leaving her alone without saying anything.

Thankfully he stopped in the living room, eyeing her fretfully. "I'm gonna go see him...alright? Someone should be home soon..." He wanted to bring her, but he *knew* Hop would have his head. This was probably the safest place for her...at least he imagined it that way. As Jonathan swung the front door open, he leaned back in to say, "If the phone rings, answer it. It might be one of us." Then the door slammed shut and she was left alone again. The girl frowned, gazing remorsefully at the floor. She couldn't spite Jonathan for leaving... she just wished she could've gone with them, rather than stay here... alone. That's when the phone rang...and Eleven heard *his* name for the first time in months.

"What do you mean he's gone?" Nancy asked, her voice dripping with alarm.

"...to hospital. For Will..." Eleven added, glancing at the door. She

thought she'd heard something, but it could've just been her imagination. Then she heard it again, feverishly scratching on the wood. El jumped, holding the phone to her ear, "...the door."

"What?" Nancy asked. She'd been unpacking her things from her backpack and sorting through El's cryptic report when a crash sounded in her ear. "Hello?" The line was still connected but there were no replies from El's end. "...Eleven? Are you there?"

El was slowly approaching the door, gingerly reaching for the knob when a familiar noise made her jump back. Despite being here for almost two days, it still never failed to scare her. Joyce had shown affection for this...*thing*, so she felt obligated to let it in. With a sigh, she nervously twisted the knob and the Byers' dog waltzed into the room. He immediately began barking at Eleven and she slammed the door shut, "No..." El felt her skin go cold with apprehension as she was backed into a corner by the beast. *Why would they keep such a terrifying monster with them in their house?!* Eleven wondered if it was to keep people like her out as the dog continued barking loudly, his tail wagging in entertainment. Her face was wide with fear as she sank to her haunches, carefully watching the dog's every move. The moment she sank to his level, the dog stopped barking and cocked his head at her curiously. Then he too sank playfully to the floor, his tail wagging more frequently. El stared in confusion as the dog rushed off into another room.

The phone rang again. Nancy had hung up thinking the connection needed to be reestablished, so El started towards the phone only to have the yellow creature return with a rope toy. She froze mid-step, flinching at the cold wetness when it nosed her hand. The dog dropped the toy at El's feet and looked up at her expectantly. Picking up on the dog's cue, the girl tentatively reached down to grasp the rope, watching as the dog jumped about in anticipation. When she held it to her right the dog followed her arm; it seemed entirely fixated on the useless knot. So she *hurled* it into the kitchen and *bolted* as soon as the dog ran after it, plopping onto the couch and picking up the phone. "...El? Is that Jonathan's dog?"

"...dog..." El repeated the word, testing her pronunciation. It barked impatiently at her, having returned and dropped the rope back at her bare feet.

"Yep...that's Huxley..." Nancy nodded into the earpiece. "Don't worry about him. He's really nice." It was hard not to be afraid of something that barked so loudly. El jumped every single time.

"Is Mike...okay?" she asked, her mind wandering elsewhere. It was all she thought about now, getting to see them again.

"...yeah! He's great," Nancy replied. She could almost see El sigh with relief. What she couldn't see was how Huxley crawled onto the couch, laying down beside the strange girl. El watched him cautiously, extending a curious hand to touch his fur. "...I think you'll be able to see each other soon," Nancy added, interpreting her silence as sadness.

"How long?" the girl asked, running her fingers through Huxley's wispy blonde hair. She marveled at how he seemed to enjoy this and a smile crossed her face, eyeing his wagging tail. If anything, this was better than being alone. Plus, he reminded her of a giant, living, breathing stuffed animal...a loud one at that.

"I'm not sure...but soon! Definitely soon," Nancy promised, hoping El could understand their predicament. Eleven began to get the sense that *soon* was a relative term. How long was soon to Nancy? Was it until the next day or before the sun went down? Was it when the moon hung highest in the sky...or would it be *many* moons from now? El couldn't tell, and she didn't know how to properly ask the girl besides restating her previous question. Huxley rested his chin on El's thigh and sighed almost sympathetically.

"Okay," El acknowledged this, leaning her small frame back into the cushions. Nancy couldn't help but feel intrigued by this girl, so new and so odd compared to everyone else. Plus, the Byers' were indebted to her for finding Will and vanquishing the monster. According to Mike, she'd also saved their lives on multiple occasions...though some of his details were a bit sketchy...

"So...how are you?" Nancy asked. El blinked twice at this, surprised at such a question. People had asked her if she was okay...but never *how* she was. It seemed to leave a lot open to interpretation.

"...good," El stated, petting Huxley amiably.

"Is Huxley there with you?" Nancy asked.

"I think so..." El nodded, smiling down at the yellow dog. "He is... nice," El observed, very relieved he'd decided against mauling her to pieces.

"Yeah. He's a good dog...*most* of the time..." Nancy mused.

"Why most of the time?" El asked, her free hand freezing mid-swipe.

"He likes to dig holes in their yard and Jonathan always has to fill them in...so he complains about him *all* the time. I think it's funny," Nancy smiled, chuckling to herself.

"Funny..." El repeated the foreign word. After a bit of silence, El suddenly asked, "Is this...normal?"

Nancy grinned at such an odd question, "Is what normal?"

"Talking...on phones..." El replied, eyeing the receiver curiously. Huxley's breath was hot and comforting on El's knee.

"Yeah! Barb and I..." Nancy trailed off, suddenly missing her all over again. Eleven gazed at the opposite wall, a look of shocked remorse crossing her face. Who was Barb? It was obviously someone Nancy cared about...and suddenly Eleven remembered spotting her corpse in the Upside Down. She hadn't meant to remind her of Barb! Nancy closed her eyes and shook her head, "...Barb and I used to talk on the phone *all* the time. We loved it...I still do..."

"Oh..." El spoke in a soft, understanding voice. "...I'm sorry." The voice suddenly broke.

Nancy was snapped from a reverie, "For what?"

El shook her head, her face contorting with sadness. Huxley licked her hand, sensing her distress. "I couldn't...save her..." Nancy listened intently, her brow creasing.

"Look...what happened to Barb is *not* your fault...*I'm* sorry we had you look for her..." Nancy searched within herself, trying to remember those sympathetic phrases people offered her during any

of her families' funerals. "...she's in a better place..."

El's eyes shot open at this, confused as to why Nancy would ever suggest that. "No..." she shook her head. "...she's not." The student hadn't considered if El knew anything about heaven and there lay a misunderstanding between them, too raw to be rectified; El thought Nancy was referring to the Upside Down, but El's disagreement only struck Nancy as overtly pessimistic. Before she had time to reconsider anything, Mike was knocking on her door.

"Shit..." Nancy muttered under her breath. "Just a second Mike!"

Eleven's ears practically perked at his name, "Mike...is he...?"

"I'm sorry but I have to go," Nancy cut her off as El rose from her seat. "Joyce or Jonathan should be there soon, and when they are, just ask if you can come over...okay?" El remained speechless, baffled as to why their conversation had to be cut short and why she couldn't see Mike now.

"Nancy? Who are you talking to?" Mike asked through her bedroom door. As he twisted the knob, peering in suspiciously, Nancy *slammed* the earpiece back into the blue receiver, trying to appear as unsuspecting as possible. On the other end, Eleven jumped, glaring forlornly at the phone as she held it out before her.

"Nobody..." Nancy shrugged.

Mike eyed her a moment before continuing, "...okay...well, Mom's home and she asked if you want to go see Will."

"I would Mike...but, I have a lot of homework to do..." she trailed off. This wasn't a lie...just, not her real intentions either. "Are you mad?"

"Mad? No. Will's gonna be better by tomorrow. What happened at school was just...freaky and weird..." Mike shook his head. "They said they wanted him to get checked out before they sent him home..."

"...what exactly did happen to him?" Nancy asked.

Mike remained silent, going over the difficult memory in his mind.

Some of it he'd already forced out, too traumatizing to bring back to the surface. Mike was focused on progress, and he didn't want to be anchored down by past memories. He only allowed himself to know that Will would recover, so he summed it up as, "...he just puked, and he was wheezing a lot...that's all."

"Oh..." Nancy sounded surprised. "Well...hopefully he'll get better..."

"He will," Mike nodded, eyeing the floor for a bit, then glancing back up at her. "Okay well, that's where I'll be. Mom's bringing Holly so you don't have to worry about watching her."

"...isn't she worried about her getting sick?" Nancy asked.

"Well, yeah! She said she'll wait outside the room and let Dustin Lucas and I go in..." Mike explained.

"Okay...good," Nancy nodded. "Just don't catch whatever he has, okay?"

"Oh...believe ME, I *won't*..." Mike waved a hand at this to Nancy's surprise. She eyed him conspicuously – taking into account how *weird* Mike occasionally acted – and he looked up at her, his face suddenly wrought with guilt. "...uh...OKAY! Bye!"

"Hey Mike?!" Nancy called. Skidding to a stop, he reappeared before her door.

"Yeah?" Nancy saw how his brow arched in a questioning manner, and she wished she could tell him everything he'd been waiting to hear. She knew she would...if not today, then another time.

*"Hey...no more secrets...okay? From now on we tell each other everything."*

"...tell Will to feel better," Nancy said, smiling over a deep, dark secret.

"...okay. Sure," Mike nodded, racing downstairs and slamming the front door behind him. Nancy sighed in exasperation, her mind swarming with worries and doubt. *She'll be fine...Huxley is there with her. She'll be fine...*



Eleven peered outside from the living room window, utterly restless. The sun peeked back at her, casting radiant shadows over the very tops of the trees in shades of purple and orange. It was almost night...the tiny lights in the sky would come out soon. Maybe Joyce would watch them with her...or Will, if he was feeling better. But it seemed whenever Jonathan or Joyce got home, they were always *bustling* about, eternally busy until they collapsed into their beds and shut their eyes. Perhaps it was just a hectic time in their lives...but she also worried it was because of her. Despite all this, she couldn't *wait* to ask them, and just thinking about it wore away at her patience. Her toes wriggled about and she gripped the windowsill, mashing her forehead against the glass and trying to make soon come faster. She flinched at a low growl resonating from behind her and when she turned there was Huxley, baring his teeth and sticking his tail straight out in distress. The yellow dog was facing the back door so El walked up to him, petting his coat and following his gaze. Huxley barked viciously, growling even louder now and El strained her ears to listen.

There was definitely someone back there doing something to the knob...trying to get in. El's breath started coming shorter and faster but she stood her ground, unable to abandon Huxley in his defense. They stood in the dead center of the living room; it was comforting to know there was an escape route directly behind her because she *did not* want to be trapped. Whoever it was...whatever they wanted, El knew she could just as easily throw them from the house and onto the back lawn...but there was a good chance she'd become incapacitated. No...she had to knock *them* out and hope they *stayed* out longer than she did. When the door opened Huxley left her side to confront the stranger – much to El's disappointment – growling angrily. Then she watched in horror as Huxley reentered the room, chewing on a large white bone of some kind, seemingly content with the stranger's presence. This, of course, was extremely unsettling to her.

"...hey Joyce...you home or...?" a man stumbled into El's eye-shot, eyeing her disbelievingly. He stood in an obnoxious manner, his hair brown but graying and his clothes disheveled and smelly. In fact, he smelled like some kind of sour liquid as it clung to his breath. El stared back at him, a good six or seven feet from the stranger. She

was only two strides from the door...and she knew she could leave now with no repercussions...if she got away. Huxley certainly wouldn't mind it, happily chewing the treat. "Who the hell are you?!" he suddenly blurted out. "I can't believe this..." he shook his head, rubbing it tiredly. He seemed like the exaggerating type... "You think two boys would've been enough for Joyce, and now *you*?!" Eleven gathered that the two knew each other, though she couldn't imagine Joyce liking him very much now. "So who the hell are you supposed to be anyway?" he asked again, taking a few steps towards her. Huxley stopped chewing the bone and glanced up at them, his ears perking expectantly. The Deadbeat Dad noticed how those brown eyes widened with each step and he froze, grinning broadly. "What? Are you *afraid* of me kid? You think I have the *energy* to even bother with *you*? Please...I'm just here to see Joyce."

Eleven glared at him, already sensing his foul intentions. "Mouth-breather..." she muttered quite audibly so he could hear.

"What the fuck did you just say to me?" he walked right up to her, towering over the smaller person. He overheard a growl rumbling deep in Huxley's throat, but he grinned when the child's glare suddenly faltered and dropped. Eleven could smell the sourness of his breath. She'd never heard a word so *sharp* and *vulgar*, and its meaning lay *completely* indecipherable to her; she questioned whether it needed to be used at all! The moment she'd realized he'd used it solely to intimidate her, he *back-handed* her right cheek so *harshly* that she saw red for an instant, then fell back onto the floor. "Show some goddamn respect you little punk..." Huxley barked, rushing up to Lonnie and *grabbing* onto his ankle, yanking it about ferociously. In one swift kick Lonnie had shooed the dog off him, though he remained nearby, growling with a foreboding hatred. Eleven had also regained her bearings, standing up before him and *truly* glaring at him now, her anger flaring up like walls of fire. She imagined being tall enough to punch *him* in the face, and with a flick of her head, it was so. A loud click, then he howled in pain, grasping his broken nose and falling back against the wall. For a rather tall bully, Eleven watched as his eyes went wide with fear.

"Go," she demanded, a hint of scarlet beneath her left nostril and a bruise already coloring her right cheek. This had worked with Mike's

enemies, so she'd figured it would be the same for one of Joyce's...but this was before she'd learn how idiotically stubborn Lonnie was when it came to confrontation.

"I'm not going anywhere you little-" More than surprised at how Lonnie was suddenly back on his feet, rushing her again, she screeched, using every bit of her brain power to *throw* him across the room and into the kitchen. The back of his head *slammed* into a cupboard and he slumped over onto his left side, unconscious. Huxley had watched it all, and when the chaos finally settled he whimpered, his tail folding between his legs as he regarded the girl cautiously.

El's mouth hung open when she'd realized what she'd done. *What if he actually was one of Joyce's friends? And I just...hurt him!* As her legs trembled with fatigue, threatening to drag her down, she looked tiredly at Huxley, who was cowering in the corner. He did not bark or growl at her, but she could see the fear in his eyes and she hated it. She couldn't wait here now...how could she explain herself? No one would believe her story, even if she managed to vocalize it correctly. She also knew that – unless she'd actually killed him – he'd eventually wake up...and he'd be mad with fury for losing to a child. El knew she didn't want to be around when that happened...but even so, if she stayed it would end up being her word against his. He was an adult...and other adults would believe him...maybe not Joyce, but she didn't know about Hopper.

She walked silently into the kitchen, avoiding Lonnie's outstretched legs and opening the fridge. Without looking she grabbed a random item with a tired hand, watching the man for any signs of movement. El walked away from the open fridge, her movements slow and quiet, opening the front door and stepping onto the porch with bare feet. She knew where she needed to go...somewhere she'd be safe. As she carelessly opened the bag of carrots, munching on one and already feeling her strength return to her, she started off into the woods, looking up to the sky and hoping it wouldn't start raining. Noticing the open door, Huxley confidently stepped outside, rushing off towards a certain castle he visited whenever he felt scared and alone.

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: Okay...I have been INCREDIBLY busy these past days

with life and a new job. This remained an open work-in-progress on my desktop for *quite a bit of time* but I ***finally*** finished it! And I am very relieved. Part of the reason it took so long was because it was difficult to write. Writing this was painful, and I simply felt relief when it was finally over. I understand this is a very serious chapter and I hope I did not upset anyone. Personally, I *despise* Lonnie's character and couldn't **wait** to see El break his nose. There will be consequences for what he did, don't worry. There will be repercussions. I don't condone Lonnie's actions in any way, but it is a real thing that happens in the real world and it's NOT okay. Anyone who has been there understands, but I am sorry for putting Eleven through this. I wanted him to be put away and this is how it happens. There will be justice. I assure you.

## 16. Back to Before

### Chapter Sixteen – Back to Before

She tapped her heel against the carpeted floor, clasping Will's hand in her own. Hopper gazed out from the second story window at the glorious sunset, wondering if Eleven was watching it with him. Occasionally, both adults glanced knowingly at each other, communicating almost telepathically at this point. Both their faces were filled with worry and doubt, but the room still maintained an overall calming atmosphere...thanks to Will. "What do you want for dinner, Mom?" Will asked, noticing their locked gaze. Hopper quickly turned away as Joyce refocused her attention on her son.

"...what do *I* want for dinner?" Joyce asked in a disbelieving tone.

"Yeah. I can ask Jonathan to help me make it for you," Will offered, a smile gracing his lips. Hopper grinned, shaking his head as he returned his gaze to the window. He didn't know Joyce's youngest very well, but he was either all-around the greatest son ever, or a clever child. Hop reminisced his own youth, recalling how he'd butter up his parents whenever he wanted something. Still, the poor kid probably just wanted things to go back to normal.

"Oh...you don't have to do that! You're exhausted, and I can *see* your eyes getting sleepy..." Joyce chuckled at him, noticing how his eyelids fluttered of their own accord.

He let out a huge yawn, then proceeded to state, "I'm not that tired!"

"Oh okay..." she rolled her eyes at this as they both chortled quietly. Hop breathed easy, basking in the relaxing energy drifting about the room, wishing it could be like this forever...maybe just not in a hospital. Then the door swung open and Jonathan rushed to Will's side.

"Jonathan!" Will exclaimed, his face lighting up at the sight of him. "You won't *believe* it! I got to see the inside of an ambulance today!" If he weren't extremely tired, he would have sat up to gesture about excitedly as he described the many contraptions and machines he'd

seen.

"That sounds exciting!" Jonathan mused, grinning down at his little brother and holding his hand comfortingly.

"I'm so sorry Jonathan, I thought you knew..." Joyce began to apologize.

"It's okay Mom...somebody else told me," he nodded knowingly at her. This went straight over Will's head as he eyed the chief gazing out through the window, spent from his story.

Joyce nodded towards the door and Jonathan hesitated, eventually nodding in return. He was more than relieved Will was in a better condition than he'd imagined. "Jonathan and I are gonna go find a nurse, okay? Jim will stay here with you," his mother said, gently tapping his hand.

For a moment, Will raised his brow at this new name, "Jim?" Joyce grinned as Jonathan glanced over at the man by the window. Will followed his gaze, exclaiming, "OH! You mean Mr. Hopper!"

"Yes..." Joyce chuckled at this, eyeing Hop as the man smiled back.

"Yep...that's my name," Hop announced. As Joyce and Jonathan exited the room, Hop pulled up a chair to sit beside Will's bed, asking, "So, what kinda things did you get to see in that ambulance?" This tiny gesture warmed Joyce's heart as her son eagerly answered, and Hop started giving him the names of some of the items, explaining their uses. Though she was engrossed in this image playing out before her, their family wasn't all here yet, and so she gingerly shut the door. They walked to a secluded section of the hall, sitting down in two green padded chairs alongside each other. Neither person looked directly at the other, just straight in front of them, studying the opposite wall.

"How is she doing?" Joyce broke the silence.

"I taught her how to make sandwiches and said she could eat whatever she wants...but I don't think she's met Huxley yet..." Jonathan fretted, studying the perfectly vertical stripes of wallpaper.

"You think he'll get along with her?"

"Oh yeah," she stated confidently, waving a hand in a tiny motion. "He loves kids and he's a good guard dog..."

"You're not worried he'll think she's a robber or something...?" Jonathan prompted. Joyce saw his point, but shook her head, trying not to think about it.

"No, I don't think so...H-Hop and I, we thought you were gonna stay with her..."

"Well, I couldn't just *stay there* when I heard Will was-"

"I *know*...I know," Joyce assured him. Now they were looking at each other worriedly, ignoring the flawless geometry facing them. "We should've called..."

"Yeah..." Jonathan nodded in agreement, gazing down at his shoes. "Mom...does anyone else know?"

"No," she shook her head. "Just me, Hop and you. That's it."

"It...isn't always gonna be that way, is it?" he asked.

She gave him an incredulous look and sighed, "Jonathan-"

"Because she has friends Mom. She knows Nancy and Mike...I mean, plus there's Will..."

Joyce sighed in exasperation, pausing to say, "Jonathan...I want her to be happy too but...Hop wants her to be *safe*. He wants *all of us* to be safe...and the more people who know about her..."

"...the more people we put in danger..." Jonathan finished her thought. Joyce nodded a little sadly, biting her lip.

"We'll...figure something out. Hop knows it, and I know it," she reassured him. "But I need *you* to know it..."

"I know...it's just, scary..." Jonathan shook his head, trailing off towards memories of last Fall. "We don't even know what's wrong

with Will...and he's so sick Mom. He's so sick..."

"I know..." Joyce sighed, their emotions boiling up within them. "But we have to stay strong...for him," she declared. "...and for her."

"Okay..." Jonathan nodded, wiping his eyes and shaking his head. He thought back to the pleasant lunch they'd shared, how she'd finally shared a smile with him once he'd promised her the sandwich would taste good. It wasn't like he'd *known* it would...but he figured that compared to **whatever** she ate before staying with them, it would be pretty tasty. In that moment, they'd sat in a perfect picture of peace and tranquility, just two kids, eating tomato burgers, watching the clouds go by.

"I know you can do it..." Joyce urged before he glanced to eye something over her shoulder. She turned to see Will's three friends, walking in a close knit group with Karen trailing close behind them. Her son noticed Jonathan's expression and a deep pit formed in his stomach, his face registering an unhealthy amount of panic. They walked right up to the door, Mike's hand already gripping the knob.

"Hang on a second boys!" Karen exclaimed, taking a seat to Joyce's right. Joyce smiled at Holly and the blonde girl giggled, reaching out for the brunette. Mike and the boys waited a bit impatiently as Karen lifted Holly into Joyce's arms, asking her, "How is he?"

"He's *much* better. It's okay if they want to see him," she nodded in confirmation. Karen gave Mike an assuring look and they opened the door, heading in as Joyce warned, "JUST...be *gentle* with him!" They didn't need a leash this time, they had already seen Will today. He hadn't been missing for a week, but he'd certainly caused some major intrigue and panic amongst the trio. Hop looked up as they approached the bed and Will's face lit up excitedly.

"You guys came to see me?" Will asked, a little shocked but happy nonetheless.

"Yeah!" Mike exclaimed.

"Mike's mom gave us a ride," Dustin announced. "And we actually wanted to ask you about the-" Lucas and Mike simultaneously shoved



him, sandwiching him between their fists. "...ow!" Hop eyed them suspiciously as Mike smiled back, trying to play off this oddity.

"...the project! We wanted to talk to you about the science project!" Mike covered.

"...for Mr. Clarke's class!" Lucas added. While his mind was too occupied working on something else, Hopper slowly walked out of the room as the boys chattered on, Will leading the mislead conversation. The moment the door latched shut, they immediately dropped their façade.

"Okay, that *thing* you puked up *almost killed me!*" Dustin exclaimed pointedly, as if it were Will's fault.

"What?!" Will asked, his smile dropping and his brow lowering in confusion.

"Yeah...Dustin wanted to *dissect* it or something..." Lucas rolled his eyes, gesturing at the word dissect.

"But we decided not to and froze it instead," Mike summed it all up as Dustin glared blue daggers at Lucas. Will sat up in bed, his eyes wide with shock and awe.

"You guys *touched* it?!" Will asked.

"Ew! No! We wore gloves and masks..." Mike assured him.

"And Nancy's sunglasses...for splatter protection," Dustin added with a grin. Lucas shuddered as Will took this in.

"...how did you freeze it?" Will asked.

"It's in a cup of water in my freezer," Dustin explained in a proud tone. "Thought of it myself..."

"No..." Will shook his head. "No you need to get it out of there..." His breath quickened and the beeping from his heart monitor began to accelerate. "It's not good in water..." For a moment his friends' eyes left him and lingered worriedly on the machine.

"Whoa whoa whoa calm down..." Dustin demanded, a hand on his shoulder as Lucas eyed the machine fearfully.

"You guys need to get rid of it," Will pressed, leaning back into the cushions.

"We wanted to but...we couldn't decide how," Lucas said, trying to ignore the incessant beeping. It was that little voice in the back of all their heads whispering a bone chilling reminder that Will wasn't okay.

"Plus we thought you'd want to see it..." Mike reminded him.

"I did but...not anymore. Dustin said it almost killed you guys..." Will trailed off guiltily. Mike rolled his eyes and stared at Dustin as Lucas took a second to process this.

"What?!" Lucas eyed his curly haired friend. "Will, he's just being a drama queen!"

"Hey!" Dustin tapped his shoulder with the back of his hand. Will seemed to calm down at this, the beeping slowing down to a normal speed. For his closest friends, the sounds were very disconcerting, with the slackening the least bit uplifting.

"...so...why do they have you hooked up to this thing?" Mike asked, pointing to the multiple wires.

"Oh...that..." Will sighed. "They don't know what's wrong with me, so they said they're going to monitor my vitals until I'm released...in case anything happens..." he explained, eyeing the large machines and bright lights. "I'm trying to leave before anything happens..."

"...why?" Mike asked, his friends watching in confusion.

"...I don't wanna be here when it happens again..." Will said, gazing at his friends with tired eyes. Dustin stared as Lucas blew out a heated sigh. Mike's face was in open shock, his eyebrows knitted downwards in the center.

"Why not?! They might be able to help you!" Mike demanded, his voice rising in disbelief. Will simply shook his head, not having the

time to answer before someone else spoke.

"So this has been happening and you *never told us?!'*" Lucas demanded in a hurt tone.

The sick boy broke in, "I didn't want you guys to worry!"

"Well, guess what?! *That's* what friends do!" Lucas barked back, not caring if his friend was sick. He needed to understand they were there for him. Lucas began shaking his head and pacing about the room.

"...has it been happening since last November?" Dustin suddenly asked, still staring at his friend in a shell-shocked manner.

Will eyed him astoundingly, "...how did you know that?"

They all stared at Dustin and he shrugged, "Lucky guess..."

Will sighed, "I think it's like a side-effect...from being in the Upside Down for so long..." They tried not to think of that place despite never knowing it's true appearance...they'd all had their own nightmares about it, ranging from places with red atmospheres to pitch black everything. "That's why I don't want it to happen here... there's no way they could do anything about it. Plus, it could get *them* sick..."

"That's what I was thinking! It's just like the chest-burster from *Alien*..." Dustin pointed, unaware of how horribly the reference sat with his dumbfounded friends.

"NO!" they all shouted at once, pushing and shoving the idea guy for making such a terrible connection. Will blinked in shock, having never considered that as an explanation. After Lucas and Mike had suspended him to the back, bickering and arguing over the statement, Joyce opened the door and they all went silent.

"You guys are pretty loud in here..." Joyce whispered, gesturing to the other rooms surrounding them. They'd forgotten there were other patients on this floor, trying to sleep.

"Sorry..." Lucas apologized.

"Yeah...we'll be quieter," Mike nodded, eyeing Dustin expectantly. There was a short silence and when he didn't say anything Lucas shoved him.

"Yeah...*sorry*," he said meekly.

"Hey Mom, do they know when I can go home yet?" Will asked before Joyce shut the door.

"They said it might have to wait until tomorrow sweetie..." she sighed, frowning with him.

"Oh..." Will sounded, eyeing the floor. "Well...I feel better now. Can you ask if I can go home tonight?"

Joyce knew her word meant nothing compared to an experienced doctor's, but she wanted things to settle as much as he did. "I'll see what I can do," she said hopefully. Will smiled her way as she gingerly closed the door.

"...so, how do you think we should, get rid of it?" Mike asked a tired Will.

The wizard eyed their Dungeon Master, knowing more than the rest of their party about these parasitic abominations and the only safe way to completely vanquish them. "...light it on fire. I don't know how but...I think water makes them stronger...fire might be the only way." Lucas, Mike and Dustin all exchanged looks of worry, eventually refocusing their attention on the boy in the bed.

"...okay. We'll get rid of it for you," Mike stated affirmatively, the rest of them nodding in agreement. Once things calmed down, the tone of the conversation brightened considerably as they switched to topics like school and homework and test grades. In the span of a few moments, they were four regular middle schoolers again.

"Hey..." The voice was distant, echoing in and out of earshot, then rising dramatically in volume, crashing loudly against deaf eardrums, "HEY!" Lonnie blinked awake, his nose burning and his back screaming in pain. Hopper had him by the coat, gripping his leather jacket threateningly. "Where the hell is she?"

"Get the hell off of me man! I didn't do nothing wrong!" he exclaimed, shoving Hop's arms. Those blue eyes were furious and Hop thought he was seeing red.

"What the hell happened to your nose?" Hop asked, already thinking he knew the answer.

"What...my nose..." Lonnie tentatively reached a hand up to touch it and winced, hissing painfully. "*Fuck...I can't even remember...*"

"Well you better start trying..." Hop growled, crouching down before him so that they were eye level. "Now I'm gonna ask you again... *where is she?*"

Lonnie eyed him, and Hop thought he saw a real amount of confusion beneath his bewildered expression. He chuckled, shrugging and still holding his nose, "I don't know who you're talking about *Sheriff...*I didn't see any girls around here." Before Hop had a chance to restate his question, Lonnie continued burying himself beneath his own alibi, bracing himself against the wall and sliding onto his feet. "Who you *should* be looking for is some little *punk* who broke in here just before you came..."

Hop blinked twice in shock as he tried to imagine the encounter that took place here. He'd found the front door open, only arriving to check on Eleven for Joyce...and instead he'd found a drunken mess. But Hop wanted to be absolutely sure. "...what'd he look like?"

"What's that got to do with anything?! He was *in here*, probably stealing a bunch of stuff from Joyce..." Lonnie exclaimed, shrugging carelessly. He winced again at his stiff back, his memories slowly returning to him in shreds. "He...called me a name...what the hell did he say...?"

Hop rose to his feet, gazing about the Byers' living room. It was too dangerous to call for her, there was *no way* he was explaining this to Lonnie, not in a million years. Joyce had already shared plenty of stories about *him*. "Yeah...so he probably called you an idiot. Then what?" the man demanded, hands resting on his hips. His voice carried with the same intensity it had before, only a bit milder. Hop's mind was alight with worry, and Lonnie's silence only accentuated it.

"Lonnie...*what happened next?!*"

Lonnie gazed off at the corner, shaking his head regretfully. Hop suddenly didn't want to hear what he was about to admit. "...I smacked him," he stated almost proudly.

"You **hit** him?!" Hop repeated in disbelief, eyeing him incredulously. His voice boomed with rage, "...we're talking about a kid here, right Lonnie?!"

"That's right...a stupid, disrespectful, good-for-nothing *kid*. But I guess those are the only types Joyce keeps around anymore..." Lonnie shook his head, reaching into his pocket for a cigarette. As he lifted it to his lips he noticed Hop glaring at him, shaking his head and rearing back with a fist. In an instant his knuckles collided with Lonnie's face and the smoke ricocheted to the floor. Hop *grabbed* his jacket, pinning him against the wall so he was eye-to-eye with the foul-breathed man.

Hop's teeth clenched around his words, his jaw as tight as a drum and his temples pulsating. "If you *ever* come around Joyce or her family again, it's gonna be bad for you. I promise." Lonnie stared him down, ignorant of Hopper's indisputable authority over him and his connection with the law. Suddenly, Hop wrenched him away from the wall, still gripping his jacket. "You're coming with me..."

"Oh *come on* Jim! I smacked him 'cuz he *deserved* it! The little-"

"I DON'T CARE LONNIE!" Hop exclaimed, spinning around to face him. "But what you probably did do, is break into Joyce's house so *you* could steal something you forgot to take with you," he took a wild guess, hitting it on the dot. "...that sound about right?"

"...you can't prove anything," Lonnie reminded him after a short silence. He was glaring at the chief now...there was a chance he wouldn't get away with this.

"Oh yeah? I bet if we asked the stupid kid, that'd give us a material witness," Hop shot back, gripping the back of his collar and pinning him against a wall. "Now put your hands behind your back..." he ordered, surveying the rest of the room for any signs as to where

she'd went. Unsure how he could've missed this the moment he walked in, Hop noticed the fridge door hanging wide open. Thankfully, Lonnie was unusually compliant and did as he was told, and the cuffs clicked into place around his wrists. It was at this point in time Hop also noticed Lonnie had a black and blue bruise on the back of his neck. It was his duty to ensure he didn't need medical treatment. "...how you feeling Lonnie?"

"...what? You cuff me and now you wanna know how I'm feeling?" Lonnie asks, his voice a mix of furious disbelief.

"You just got a pretty nice shiner on the back of your neck there...any idea how that happened?" Hop asked, walking him towards the door. Suddenly the recently compliant man now stood still as a stone, unmovable and rigid. His eyes sat wide open as the memory finally broke the lining of his subconscious.

"...he did this weird thing..." Lonnie muttered towards his boots. "...it was like he'd pushed me, but he hadn't moved a muscle."

Hop's gut lurched uncomfortably, finally understanding exactly what happened. "So...you think maybe that's how that got there?" he asked, his voice a usual tired note. Lonnie blinked from his reverie, turning to glare at the chief.

"...yeah. That's where I got the damn bruise. Anything else Doctor?" he mocked him as Hop yanked him towards his patrol car. "...kid probably has one worse than mine..."

"I seriously doubt that," Hop sighed, opening his door and putting Lonnie in the back seat.

"What-?" Hop let the door slam shut on his question, breathing deeply and eyeing the surrounding trees. A pit in his stomach warned him that she may have returned to the trees...or that she could be lost in the darkness. Or that the men from the state had spotted her by now and recaptured their science experiment...Hop shook his head as Lonnie yelled incomprehensibly at him through the window. *They would just have to wait and see...* Hopper reluctantly sat in the driver's seat, watching as a yellow dog exit the forest behind Joyce's home and lay on the front porch. He would have to remind Joyce to check

Will's fort...but just thinking about that made him crave nicotine. *What is Joyce gonna say when she finds out? This is all my fault...* "...are we gonna stay here and talk about our feelings or am I actually heading down to the station?" Lonnie asked, sending Hop's anger over the edge.

"Let me worry about that Lonnie. You just focus on coming up with a good story to tell...what's her name...*Cynthia*?" Hop sighed, shifting gears. Lonnie shook his head slowly before slamming it into the back of the headrest in front of him.

"Thanks Mrs. Wheeler!" Dustin said as he climbed out of the car. He waved, closing the door, then making a silly face at Holly in the back seat. She giggled at her brother's funny friend, her eyes lighting up with excitement. Mike and Lucas smiled at this as Dustin went into his house. Only then did Karen drive away towards the Sinclair's.

"So, Lucas...how are things at home?" Karen asked.

"Oh...um...pretty boring actually..." Lucas smiled in an awkward way.

"Everything's going well, I assume?" she checked, raising her brow at this. It took Lucas so long to answer that Mike turned to eye him in the backseat. He was unfocused, his eyes glued to the window, following each passing object for a bit of time.

"...oh! Yeah! Things are great..." Lucas snapped back into focus as soon as the car rolled to a stop. "Sorry..." he apologized for his distance.

"That's perfectly alright. You guys have had a busy day," Karen assured as Lucas climbed from the car.

"Thanks for the ride," he smiled at her, then baby-Holly, then he nodded at Mike. They shared a momentary look, knowing what was on their agenda for tomorrow.

"No problem!"

"See ya tomorrow!" Mike called as Lucas entered his house. Karen pulled away as Mike laid back into his seat with a heavy sigh. "I can't



believe they didn't let him leave..." Mike blurted out. "I mean, he was basically already better..."

"Now Mike, you don't know that..." she reminded him that he wasn't a doctor.

"You would've thought the same thing Mom! You should've seen him, he was *fine*," Mike declared, hoping Will didn't puke up another slug at the hospital. The truth was that Will *wasn't* fine...he just needed to pretend to be a little longer until they cleared him. Then he could come home.

"Mike, try not to get worked up over this. If he's as well as you say he is, then he should be back soon," Karen consoled, eyeing a worried Holly in the rearview mirror. They turned onto Maple Street, approaching their home. "Oh, and you need to take out the garbage before you go to bed. You *know* which one, and I have to say it is unacceptable the way you've been neglecting your chores."

"But Mom..." Mike sighed, remembering he'd forgotten to when he'd gotten home. They'd been busy with the slug all day, then the next thing he knew it was off to see Will at the hospital.

"I don't care. It's been overflowing for days now," they parked in the driveway, a flood light washing over them in a white glow. "Please just do it, I have to put Holly to bed...and *you* need to get to bed too!"

Mike sighed, "Fine..." They both exited the car and Mike shuffled through the front door, his feet sore and his eyes heavy and tired. He took off his jacket and draped it onto the coat rack when Karen entered carrying Holly in her arms. As Karen slowly led the girl upstairs, Mike took off his shoes, ditching them by the front door. His throat was unusually dry so he poured himself a glass of water, heading into the basement. Setting the glass on the table, Mike began fumbling with the bag, trying to hoist it out of the can. He froze his movements when the back of his neck tingled and the hairs on his arms stood on end, and Mike experienced a sudden and overwhelming sensation of being watched. This had happened before...nights like this. Slowly, he turned to eye the fort and his lips parted in awe.

She'd watched him come down the stairs, amazed that he hadn't noticed her immediately. By the time he'd turned around she was halfway to her feet, and now she stood before him, their eyes locked. Both of them thought it may have been a dream, except one of them discerned otherwise. To Mike's horror, there – marring her otherwise untouched face – was a painful-looking, purple bruise she seemed not to mind. There were also filthy bandages clinging desperately to different parts of her feet, obviously having come undone at some point. Then there was the streak of blood, lingering beneath her nostril, dried in garnet. His fingers were still clutching the bag and he knew it wasn't a dream...she would never appear to him so battered and bruised, so black and blue; not in a million of his dreams. This was happening. It was real. He watched, wanting to say something but still frozen and speechless as her eyes drifted over him, glistening and raw with emotion. Her lip trembled as she too saw the reality of the situation and Mike saw her cry.

He rushed over to her as she fell into his arms, embracing her as much as she was him. They'd fallen to their knees hugging each other, and Mike could feel his face boiling and his throat choking up. "Please don't cry..." he said, his voice nearly breaking. Her shoulders shivered as she tried to bite back sobs of relief and happiness. A great storm had finally subsided as a strange new weather pattern ensued upon her mind. Through all her great sorrow, she'd learned what joy meant without ever hearing the spoken word...all on her own. "You came home. El, you're home! Don't cry..." Mike plead, holding her tighter. They could hear one another's breathing, and while Mike was unsure of whatever cosmic act of mercy allowed them to share this moment, he wasn't about to ruin it by asking. Eleven listened close to his heartbeat, memorizing it's quick, fluttering pattern.

"Home..." she whispered it as her emotions practiced a dangerous balancing act, her fears and doubts slipping from her mind with every tear. Before today...before last November even, she'd let a man be her sky, her moon, her stars and her ocean, describing these things but never allowing her to witness them. If she had dreams, then she'd let him dream them for her. She was his project, existing beside him as he lived his life in motion outside of the facility...or so she imagined it that way. For her, life had been a road so certain and straight and unbending. As she relished in Mike's warm embrace,

hoping it could last a little bit longer, she knew she could never go back to before.

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: \*wipes tears\* What?! I'm fine...just...give me a minute...

\*clears throat\* Alright...so, this was obviously long overdue. I hope you guys enjoy the story so far! I certainly enjoy writing it for you guys and I was DYING to finish this as best as I could. THIS IS NOT THE END! Think of it as, a new beginning...for Eleven and Mike and Hopper and everyone else. Follow for more chapters and tell me what you think. Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*

## 17. Empathy

### Chapter Seventeen - Empathy

"Hey boy..." Jonathan reached down to pet Huxley's head, opening the door and letting him inside. As he stepped into his home, he immediately sensed a difference in the atmosphere, as if he could still feel his father's aura lingering about the room. Huxley's whining snapped him back to reality as he sat patiently before his food bowl. Still a bit distracted, Jonathan closed the door behind him and fed Huxley, twisting the lid of the kibble box. As the yellow dog chomped away at the tiny pebbles, Jonathan looked about the room, taking notice of the echoing silence. "...Eleven?" He strode into each room, peering into his mother's bedroom last as an overpowering dread swept over him, choking his heart and lungs. "No..." he breathed, rushing outside to his car. "Eleven?!" he called into the night. Misty rain drifted to the grass around him as he circled about the lawn. This couldn't be happening. His mother had *entrusted* him with the responsibility of keeping her safe, and now she was gone. What if she was hurt or lost...or worse?! Jonathan's mind took no time in shadowing over with the endless possibilities as he climbed into his car, forcefully twisting the key. As the ignition roared to life he sped off, setting his sights on Maple Street. He was so worked up that he hadn't even considered a simple phone call...but his mind quickly dissected this plan for faults and found plenty. What if Mr. or Mrs. Wheeler answered and not Nancy? What if Mike answered?! No...he needed to be smart about this...Hop would want him to.

Ever since the incident with Will, Jonathan had made a point to take a different route to the Wheeler's, circumventing Mirkwood altogether. Tonight was different, and his wheels bounced against the pavement as he sped past the barbed-wire fence. Occasionally he'd glance through the gating, noting the enormous satellites and bright lights adorning the ominous facility. His brow lowered and his face grew stern as he pondered endlessly about what went on behind those thick, gray walls. Was it really where she'd come from? Hop had loosely explained the girl's origins but it still occasionally confused him whenever he noticed her curiosity. The way her eyes studied every tiny line and detail of any new object, or the way she

smiled at him when he was amiable or childish.

Jonathan reached the end of the road, slowing to a contemplative stop as his wheels rested against the moist blacktop. She'd claimed all of Joyce's attention last night, and if he didn't right this, her absence would be just as consuming, and his mother would crumble beneath her regret. As he checked both ways, he realized she now meant something to him...he *cared* for her, like any brother would for a younger sibling. Yet she'd only just reappeared in their lives...he shook his head. It didn't matter whether they needed her or if they even cared...she needed them. She needed a family. He flicked the blinker on, turning onto Cornwallis, rapidly approaching Maple Street.

"You've got nothin' on me Hop! No evidence, no witness..." Lonnie jeered from his temporary holding cell. Hop sighed, knowing he had bigger things to attend to.

"Well then why don't you make this a little easier on yourself?" he groaned as Callahan and Powell looked on. The pale one went to fetch the paperwork Lonnie would have to fill out with a sigh. They all knew Lonnie here...he was actually quite famous, and that had **nothing** to do with his *tiny* connection to the Chief. He'd been brought here on his own accord before he'd moved off to the city, driving drunk and endangering pedestrians with his '72 Oldsmobile. "What were you *doing* in Joyce's house?" Hop pressed, fed up with his ignorance. Callahan handed him the paperwork and Lonnie began filling it out, smirking to himself as Hopper lost his patience. The chief shook his head, walking away and saying, "We've got *all* night Lonnie. You just ask for me when you wanna talk." Lonnie watched him go, his eyes full of undeserved judgement.

"Way to do your job, sheriff..." he muttered, throwing the papers at Callahan's boots in a flurry. The officer sighed, crouching down to retrieve the loose sheets.

"...you didn't even fill these out-

"I don't give a shit," Lonnie announced as Callahan gritted his teeth, trying to distance himself from the man's blind anger. Powell snickered, watching as his comrade meekly dodged the line of fire.

"Alrighty then..." he sighed, collecting the papers as best he could and leaving the steel bars behind him. Powell remained, watching the man with mild contempt.

"Why the hell are you still here?" Lonnie barked.

"I'm here to make sure you don't do anything *else* stupid..." he remarked indifferently. Lonnie glared at him a moment, squinting his eyes almost comically. Then he closed them, shaking his head and resting it against the wall in a tired fashion. It was nearly two in the morning, and Powell yawned at the clock. He felt it was moving slower with each minute.

Callahan knocked on Hop's office door, "Chief? You got a minute?"

Hop popped an altoid into his mouth, "Yeah, come on in..." The tall young man walked in as Hop rose to his feet.

"Chief, he wrote a bunch of curse words all over the papers...he's not gonna work with us, is he?" Callahan showed him the sheets, defamed with Lonnie's vulgarity and Hop sighed.

"Just hold him here until I get back, I'll take care of it..." Hop sighed, exiting the room.

"Uh...Chief?! You're leaving now?" Callahan exclaimed, stopping Jim in his tracks.

"Cal, I *will* be back. Just keep him here for a bit longer..." Hop instructed a second time. Their youngest officer looked a bit fretful, so Hop walked up to him, gripping him on both shoulders reassuringly. "I'm leaving you in command until I get back. Don't worry so much about the paperwork...he's already in the system."

"Oh. Okay," Callahan shrugged. "He does look a little...beat up though..."

"Yeah well he probably deserved it..." Hop commented as Callahan eyed him suspiciously. "...it actually wasn't me."

Callahan raised his brow at this, "Oh...that's..."

"Surprising, I know..." Hop sighed, tapping him on the shoulder a final time. He began walking out, "You got any questions, ask Powell or Flo." Callahan watched as he left, dreading his absence because it made his job harder. Back in the holding cell, Powell watched as Flo extended an ice pack to Lonnie.

"Here. You look like shit," she noted in a blatant fashion. "Figured you could use it," she reasoned as he took the ice pack.

"...yeah...thanks Flo..." he said almost disdainfully. Powell shook his head, grinning to himself as Flo returned to the front desk. She watched Hop's car pull from the parking lot, speeding away. After a sigh and an eye-roll, her focus returned to the seemingly infinite piles of paperwork. An unseen car pulled into the exact spot Hop had left empty, its anonymous occupants approaching the police station, their shoes crossing the concrete determinedly.

Jonathan couldn't believe he was doing this. Surely he'd get caught... there was no way someone *wouldn't* notice. With a sigh, he rolled silently up to the Wheeler's, his headlights off and his radio silent. Rain was pouring from the heavens, aiding Jonathan in his stealth. Still, he didn't want to risk anything. The moment he pulled his keys from the ignition, he exited his car and gingerly shut the door. He crept up to the Wheeler's garage, standing in shock when two flood lights blinded him, ducking behind a few trashcans. Until the lights dimmed, he did not move. If he was caught, it wouldn't be the first time...so he *wouldn't* get caught. Besides, Nancy would understand his reasoning...at least, he hoped she would. He faintly remembered the view from her bedroom window and discerned that it must've been the one directly above him. Stepping lightly around the yard, he gathered a few tiny pebbles, piling them in his palm and situating himself a good throwing distance away. Something kept Jonathan from pitching that first stone...he didn't know what it was. Every social stigma from his past came swarming back to him, threatening to hinder his confidence. Rather than drop the pebbles and walk away, he shook his head. *He had to find her. He couldn't let her down.*

A ping. Nancy's eyes drifted open at the foreign sound, adjusting to the comforting nightlight on her dresser. She was tucked away beneath her covers and had just woken from a particularly deep sleep...and just as her eyes began to drift back shut, another ding

came from her window. Her eyebrows furrowed and she sat up, looking over her shoulder and out into the night. She waited, wondering if it was just something else in her room when she saw a tiny rock ricochet off the glass, pinging softly in night. A part of her didn't want to check, knowing it was probably Steve, but she was already crossing the room and peering down from the pane. Jonathan stood below, looking up at her worriedly. A look of surprise crossed her face as she opened the window, a chilled breeze swaying her hair. "Jonathan?" Nancy whisper-shouted.

"Sorry...I didn't want to call, because of how late it is..." he replied in an equally stressed whisper. Nancy eyed him confusingly, about to ask how he thought driving to her house was any better when he said, "It's just...Nancy she's *gone*."

"What?!" Nancy demanded in a normal voice, immediately checking her shoulder. Had she heard him correctly? "Here...climb on those cans and get up here," Nancy pointed at the green plastic beside him. Jonathan glanced at her a second, checking to make sure she was serious, then sighed and followed her instructions. When he planted his foot on her roof, it slipped on the moist surface and she gasped, reaching out for his hand. He clamped onto hers, desperately gripping the edge of the window for support and she pulled him up. Drenched and gasping with shock, he scrambled into her room. His hair dripped onto her carpet and his shoes left imprints on the material.

"Oh...I'm sorry..." he apologized, reaching down to untie his shoes.

"It's fine! I'll be right back..." she whispered back, quietly leaving her room to fetch a towel from the bathroom. When she returned he'd placed his shoes on the pane of the open window. "Here...for your hair," she offered, a cheeky smile.

"Thanks..." he smiled back, tousling it through his hair gratefully. He noted the familiarity of her room, remembering almost every detail right down to the ballet-slipper necklace resting gracefully below her collar bones...

"So...what did you want to talk about?" Nancy asked, a little more than curious with him. "You said she was...gone?"



"The girl...Eleven...she wasn't home when I got back...and I wanted to know if she came here," Jonathan explained in a tired note. Nancy immediately felt a sharp pang of guilt for not staying on the phone with her. She remembered the helicopters Hopper had pointed out while they'd searched for her brother and her mind flooded with worry.

"I...don't think she's here Jonathan..." Nancy shook her head, gazing dreadfully out through her window. Her eyes were filled with displaced guilt, and Jonathan could see it.

"...are you sure?" he pressed. "Your brother seems to be pretty good at hiding girl's in his basement..." His smile brought her back and she grinned with him, shaking her head playfully.

"I still can't believe he..." she began, trailing off once what Jonathan had said began to sink in. That was one thing she admired about him; he only spoke his mind and when he thought necessary...he'd never lied to her, not *once*. "...you think maybe..." He nodded, his smile gone but his eyes intense and full of worry. Now that she thought about it, she needed to find out too. So they wordlessly crept into the hallway, trying not to step on the squeaky parts of the stairs as they snuck into the basement. Every now and then a sound made every hair on Jonathan's head stand up and they'd both freeze with apprehension...eventually continuing downstairs. Nancy was the first to peek into El's fort, sad to find it empty. She looked back to Jonathan, "She's not here..." Jonathan looked hopeless for a moment, his eyes blinking and his head shaking regretfully. She saw how he was putting this on himself and it killed her.

"Maybe...maybe she went...back home already..." his hands clasped behind his head, squeezing the liquid from his wet hair as it trickled down his back. Unwelcome chills raced through his body as Nancy watched him pace about for a ten seconds, eventually planting himself before her.

"I'm sorry Jonathan...this is where she stayed..." Nancy gazed down at the blanket fort, eyeing Mike's yellow sleeping bag. *He'd given that to her? He never even let me borrow it!* When she looked back up at Jonathan she could see his mind was elsewhere. Right now, he was inconsolable, engrossed in the thinking and guessing. He was gazing

down at his socks, still wet from the rain.

"...I need to, get my shoes..." he announced, starting back up the stairs determinedly quiet. Nancy followed, wearing a sullen, defeated expression. Jonathan crossed Nancy's floor as she peered thoughtfully into her brother's room, the door hanging barely ajar. Without warning, her heart jumped and fluttered, and she stared into the darkness. Jonathan waited behind her, curious...but not wanting to invade anyone *else's* privacy this school year. They stayed that way for a whole twenty seconds before Jonathan spoke in a hushed whisper, "Nancy?" The person beneath the covers shifted nocturnally, the covers slipping down to expose a part of their hair...their very short hair. Nancy couldn't take her eyes away as they feverishly scoured the room for her brother. Eventually she found him, laying on a pile of sloppily strewn blankets and pillows in the corner beside the foot-board. It was clear to her now, though she wished Mike had told her beforehand. Nancy stepped back, nodding for Jonathan to peek inside. He eyed her confusingly but she gestured again, raising a finger to her lips mindfully. Awkwardly, he traded places with her and peeked inside, not knowing what he was looking for. He eyed her shrugging incredulously.

"In the bed," she whispered. He gazed back in, his eyes straining in the darkness. Eventually he saw the familiar curve of her head and the shortness of her hair, remembering how light it actually was compared to Nancy's brother's. He sighed with relief, knowing she was in a safe place and not in some stone-floor facility. Nancy watched as he turned back to smile comfortingly at her, though his eyes hung heavy with fatigue. They headed downstairs so they could talk freely, leaving Mike's door ajar.

"She must've ran here because she was afraid..." Jonathan figured. "I *knew* she'd be afraid of Huxley..."

"Actually...her and Huxley were getting along pretty well," Nancy noted as Jonathan eyed her wonderingly.

"Wait...how do you know?"

"I called, and...*she* answered," Nancy smiled, expressing her surprise. "We talked for a bit, but I had to hang up..." she shook her head. "I

shouldn't have done that..."

"...it's not your fault. She's safe now..." Jonathan reassured her. "Maybe...that's all that matters."

Nancy shared a very relieved smile with him, confident that things were finally the way they were meant to be. "How's Will doing?"

Jonathan blinked back at this, admiring her even more for simply asking, "He's...hanging in there. I think he'll be fine. It was probably just an asthma attack..."

"Oh," she trailed off a little awkwardly. "I didn't know he had asthma."

"Me neither," he noted, pursing his lips and growing rather pensive. She could see he was still deeply concerned by Will's condition, and she guessed they still didn't know everything. For any family member, this was sufficient cause for alarm.

The sound of the rain was suddenly loud, and they became acutely aware of each other's silence. "You should...probably head home. So you can let your mom know she's fine..."

"Oh, right," he said, getting lost in her viciously blue eyes. Everything about her fascinated him, from the innumerable outfits she wore in confidence right down to the peculiar curve of her jaw. They stood before the Wheeler's front door and despite the lukewarm spring showers and the lack of Christmas décor...he imagined last year. He remembered how softly her lips had grazed his cheek, and for a moment they were all he could look at. "Sorry again for...throwing, rocks at your window..." he coughed up another unnecessary apology, somehow managing to speak properly.

She shook her head, "It's fine! It was...actually kind of, charming...in a, weird, funny way."

*Charming?! What was he supposed to do with that information? How should he reply?*

"...really? I was afraid you'd think it was creepy..." Jonathan admitted.

"Jonathan, I knew we needed to talk. With everything that's been happening, I don't know why I didn't stay up later..." she explained, easing his strained nerves. His temples felt like they were going to burst. "I was expecting you...just, not *that* early. Still though, it's fine. Everything's the way it should be."

"Well...actually it's not..." Jonathan sighed, his warm smile dropping for a moment. "Do your parents know about her yet?"

This hadn't occurred to Nancy, who had impulsively assumed Mike could maintain his ruse forever. "No...actually. They haven't met her at all," she admitted.

"Well, that should happen tomorrow. I'll...ask Hopper to help explain everything. I think he knows more than the rest of us," he said. Nancy watched his eyes flit from object to object as he spoke, wishing he could keep them confidently on her. "Either way, we should all probably be there...does Mike have school?"

"No. He starts Spring Break, just like the rest of us," Nancy announced with a smile. Now the tracks were set and she happily said, "Sounds like a good plan."

"We do make the best ones though, don't we?" Jonathan noted, reminding her of last November. She smiled, nodding agreeably. They gazed into each other's eyes a moment longer until Nancy covered her yawn with the back of her hand.

"Sorry...I was sleeping like a baby up there," she said with a chuckle.

"Well, we should both probably get some rest..." he remarked, nodding understandably. A little awkwardly, he smiled and said, "Goodnight Nancy." He'd wanted to hug her, even though it felt out of place.

"Goodnight Jonathan," Nancy replied, subconsciously thinking about their kiss. But it didn't happen, he was already halfway to his car and she was shutting the door softly behind him, leaning against its timbers. She'd just broken up with Steve...now was a *dangerous* time for her. A part of her believed she was still emotionally raw for thinking of Jonathan that way...but another part of her rebuked this

notion, recalling how she'd undeniably thought of them *while* she'd been dating Steve. Yes, she'd thought about it. No, she hadn't acted on it...that was a dangerous time and she'd only just started talking to Jonathan. Now, their families seemed to be at an unknown peace, all thanks to the reappearance of this strange little girl. Thoughts of Mike and Eleven made her chuckle as she climbed her stairs, tucking herself back within her covers and gazing into the soft glow of the lamp. It was comforting...warm and soft like an eternal sunset. Confidently and with purpose, Nancy reached across the gap and switched it off.

Cold fear swept over him and he tossed and turned in his sleep. Faraway sounds echoed against his ear canal, bouncing around violently in his head. They sounded sad and hurt as the voice whimpered in a soft-spoken tone. He couldn't take it anymore! If he stayed in this dream it would transform into a nightmare. Before it had a chance to haunt him, he snapped awake only to grasp his carpet in shock. To his horror, the sounds had been real and were still going on as she whimpered and struggled against some imaginary foe, digging her nails angrily into his covers and tossing about helplessly. Mike crossed the room and placed his hands on hers and she promptly dug his nails into his skin. As he did his best to subdue a shriek she continued crying softly, a sheen of sweat coating her skin. "El...El you're dreaming...it's not real," he assured her in a low volume. If she got any louder his parents would hear. Whether she liked it or not she *needed* to be quiet. He felt foolish because she'd – for reasons unknown to him – wanted to sleep *in the bed with him*, but that was NOT going to happen. So he slept on the floor, figuring the company would ease her mind. When her nails dug in a second time, it became readily apparent that his presence *hadn't* helped her. Her whimpers became sobs and they were *too* loud. She needed to stay a secret, just a little longer. Just until tomorrow morning. "El! EL!" he whisper-shouted into her ear. She quieted at this, now actually holding his hand instead of white-knuckling it. As he winced down at his pink hands, she sighed into a pillow, still very asleep, though he had no idea how. He noticed streaks of tears lining her face and it was more than enough for him. "El...wake up...we have eggos here."

Her eyes snapped open and she stared him down almost immediately,

seemingly forgetting about the horrible nightmare she'd just experienced. "...Mike?" She seemed pretty surprised at their proximity but didn't mind it.

"El..." he blew out a sigh of relief. "You were dreaming...well, having a nightmare really." She sat up, still gripping his near-punctured hands. "You were...crying..." he told her, and she reached up to wipe her face, surprised that it wasn't just in her dream.

"I'm sorry..." she apologized, her eyes lowering to the floor. El figured he'd wanted her to stay quiet since she wasn't in the basement anymore. He frowned, noticing her bruise better in this light.

"No...don't be. I had nightmares too for a while," he admitted, his eyes wandering to his feet.

"Why?" she asked, eyeing him compassionately. Mike didn't know it, but his ability to connect with her on an empathetic level brought him that much closer to her heart...neither of them really knew it. But that connection existed all the same.

"Well...they just, *happened* after you were gone. I thought that...maybe, you weren't coming back..." he shared with her, his voice steady and comforting amidst their fears.

"Mike..." she consoled, tightening her grip on his sensitive hands.

"...but not anymore! You're back, and that's all that matters. No more nightmares," he announced, smiling at her. His knees were beginning to ache from kneeling beside the bed for so long, but he ignored it. If he focused any more on her pupils he was afraid he'd burn holes in them. So his brown eyes took turns flitting to different parts of her face; they were random places, like her nose or her brow, or her ears. And an insatiable anger welled up whenever they lighted on the bruise.

"Promise," she said more than asked him. A pang of guilt swiped his chest as he was reminded of that horrible day. Almost everything had fallen into place...except for her. She'd fallen somewhere else...far away from any conception of peace or happiness and too far for his promise to reach. Yet despite the time they'd spent apart, he still felt

like they could pick up right where they left off...wherever *that* was.

"I promise. No more nightmares," he vowed, smiling warmly at her. She smiled back at this, resting her frame into the mattress as he released her hands. "Do you want the covers on or off?" he asked. *He knew this about her. He'd noticed it and remembered.* Mike had figured it was a coping mechanism instilled in her since her escape...how she'd constantly been on the run and was still hiding from the Bad Men. If she was *under* the covers, it would take her *longer* to get up if something dangerous demanded it. *She probably wants them off,* he thought.

"...on," she replied, taking him by surprise as he covered her frame. "Goodnight Mike..."

"Goodnight El..." he said, smiling down at her. "I'll see you in the morning," he reminded her, hoping it would keep the nightmares at bay. If he was caught now, he didn't know what he'd do. They'd probably have to pretend she was a boy from his school...but Mike wasn't sure he could even do that! She'd struck him as feminine the instant he'd seen her, shivering and alone. And he'd almost immediately recognized her uniqueness...that she was different. He just hadn't fathomed exactly *how* different...until she'd flipped the van and saved his life...twice. Mike returned to his blankets and pillows, watching her watch him as he crawled beneath them, spreading out against the rigid carpet. He shifted against the floor, doing his best to ignore the discomfort. She was worth it, this tiny sacrifice. Their eyes stayed locked and they occasionally smiled at each other, simply overjoyed at the other's presence. Then Eleven's eyes began to lazily drift shut, and with a deep breath she fell back asleep, wrapped in the warmth of Mike's comforter.

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: Thanks everyone so much for reading! This is probably one of the brightest of the chapters...so far, that is. I really hope you guys enjoy and follow for more chapters because we are *far* from over with the story. Tell me what you think! Keep on writing! -  
*Nightlock*

## 18. Corruption

### Chapter Eighteen – Corruption

Hop was back in almost record time, with her once again as she slept peacefully beside Will's bed. "Joyce," his hand found hers as he gently woke her.

"...huh?" she peered up at him, yawning unabashedly. "W-What is it Hop?"

"She wasn't there Joyce..." he stated, his face devoid of any expression besides guilt. Joyce stared a moment in disbelief, shaking her head. The nightmare they'd just been through suddenly proved fruitless as they were both faced with each other's hopelessness. "Lonnie was there. He came to your house while we were gone and saw her," he continued to Joyce's horror. Will's eyes were closed, but he was merely feigning sleep. Their conversation was far too intriguing to ignore, even though he was more than exhausted. He already had so many questions...*who was she? Why had his father come back? And why was Hopper suddenly so involved in their lives?*

"What happened?" she demanded, a flare of anger coating her words. Hop remained silent, shaking his head and clamping his eyes shut. He walked from the room like the dead and she followed, kissing Will's forehead before she went. Her son couldn't help but open his eyes, watching through the glass as they receded from view. Once Hop had shuffled down the hall, he picked a chair to fall into and held his head in his hands. Joyce sat beside him, a comforting hand on his back. His breath came slow and heated, as if each exhale was steam emanating from a broken-down car. "Hop...you can tell me...I *need* to know," she consoled. "I'm *here* for you."

"...everything we did to find her. And it was all for nothing..." Hop shook his head, entirely convinced she would never return. His heart felt more like a stone than a vital organ. Joyce watched him, horrified and angry. He made it sound like she was...*gone*.

"What happened?" she repeated, leaning closer to him. If he were any more stressed, his hair would gray and his eyes would go bloodshot.



She noticed they were a bit moist as he kept them glued to the floor. He didn't know it would hit him this hard...but before today - when these situations were simple thoughts - he hadn't factored in Lonnie's part in the process.

"...when I found him he was unconscious and barely sober. He said he thought she was a burglar," he began, his breath becoming harder and harder to control. "...so he hit her." Joyce gasped, instantly understanding Hop's anguish and doubt. They both suddenly felt helplessly unsteady, their tiny boat sailing aimlessly into a maelstrom. "But she must've...fought back," he guessed, sighing deeply. "His nose was broken and he had a neck injury..." Each fiber of their beings yearned to laugh at this...but their humor had been obliterated along with her absence. "I don't know where else she could've gone Joyce..." he admitted, shaking his head regretfully. To him, it was all over. Things had gone too far already and she'd been pushed over the edge. In his mind, she'd fled to escape them entirely when in fact, an **obvious** possibility was being blocked by a thick cloud of grief.

"Well...what about the Wheeler's?" Joyce said in a semi-hopeful tone. Hop glanced up to stare at her, his expression one of inspiration and awe. It only confused Joyce, "She...could've gone there...t-to be with Will's friend." His mind rewound itself, recalling Mike's face and how she'd clung to his side last November. Back then, she was nothing more than a lost child to him, a controlled experiment spiraling further and further into chaos. He couldn't name what she was to Joyce and him now...he wasn't certain El even imagined that they cared so deeply. The only thing he could liken her to was a child... *their child*. They were her caretakers, whether they liked it or not. She was *their* responsibility.

"Yeah..." he breathed. "She could've gone there..." After a moment's breath, Hopper shot to his feet, a new purpose driving him.

"Hop!" He was nearly down the hallway when her voice stopped him in his tracks. He turned to face her as she approached him, asking, "Are you gonna be okay?" A hand found his arm and he clasped it in his own, eyeing her tiredly.

"...I will be," he said in an uncertain tone. "Once I find her."

"Are you going there now?" she asked. "I should go too..."

"No. You need to stay here...with Will..." he suggested. For a moment, she glared at him, but to his surprise it dropped as a familiar fatigue consumed her.

"...alright," Joyce nodded, understanding Hop's perspective. Her own son needed her, and for a moment she recognized the immediate pros of having a partner. There were *two* of them, on the *same* team, working towards the *same* goals. Hop nodded, holding her hand in his tenderly. Joyce broke this awkward gesture and hugged him, standing up on her toes to encircle his neck with her arms. His height forced him to lean down a bit, but he wouldn't wish it any differently. Their bodies yearned for a warm embrace and they stayed that way for quite some time, relishing in each other's arms. Joyce loved how he smelled, washed yet manly with a bit of perspiration for good measure. Her scent reminded him of clean linen and showers. "Tell her I love her, Hop," Joyce demanded in a gentle voice. "Tell her I'm gonna be there **as soon** as I can," she added, their minds returning to the task at hand.

"I will," he promised, releasing the short woman and gazing down at her. As long as they had each other, nothing could phase them and they had an eternal support system. It wasn't just getting to see each other...it was having faith that the other was okay, knowing they'd be at home in each other's arms as much as in their own residences. Before he could stop himself, he leaned down and captured her lips in his own. Joyce was taken aback for a second, but realized it had been what she'd wanted to do for a long time. This bliss lasted only a few moments, but they each felt it was long overdue and reluctantly, they separated, gazing into each other's eyes. Joyce couldn't tell that Hop was memorizing every detail of her face, for sanity's sake. "I'll be back with an update, as soon as I can," he swore to her, battling with himself over whether to stay. Joyce nodded, cradling her arms and watching as he strode down the hall. Never had she felt this kind of love in all her years...it seemed **much** more real and honest than what she'd had with Lonnie. As she returned to Will's side, easing into the stiff-backed chair, her mind busied itself with what they could be. No...she imagined a new picture, wondering what they already were. She imagined Hop was the same type of parent she was: a no

nonsense, play-with-your-kid-at-the-park, tickle-monster kind of dad. These thoughts came readily to her and flowed with ease...and that was almost assuredly a good sign.

"Hopper? I thought you'd turned in for the night," Flo wondered aloud as he pushed through the doors.

"Almost...just needed to grab a few things..." he noticed Callahan and Powell both playing cards in the middle of the room. The youngest suddenly noticed Hopper glaring at him, flinching with alarm. "Why is no one watching Lonnie Byers?"

"Oh...we were waitin' here to tell you about that," Powell noted, nodding expectantly towards Callahan.

With a forced sigh, Cal reported, "Some men from the state claimed jurisdiction over the entire case and took custody of him...they had the papers and I wasn't sure what..." Hop's expression sent them all into a sudden silence. "...to...do..."

"You okay Chief?" Powell asked. "It's less paperwork for us anyway. Now *they* get to deal with him..." Flo even turned to glance his way, curious with the odd delay in their conversation.

Hop eyed Callahan after spacing out for a second, immediately regretting leaving him in charge. Hell, he could've left *Flo* in charge and this might not have happened! "I couldn't do anything. They said...something about him being part of a bigger case..." Callahan explained, watching as Hop's face grew sterner and colder.

"You look like you're actually worried about him Chief..." Powell noted in a humorous tone, chuckling to himself. The color had left him as Flo eyed him fretfully.

"Is everything okay Hop?" Flo asked, walking right up to him, observing the openness of his face. A deep concern pitted in all their stomachs as the two officers exchanged questioning glances.

"Yeah..." he lied in a breath. "Everything's...fine," he lied again, his gut twisting horribly as his mind buzzed with conspiracies. Flo noticed how he moved in a trance-like state, walking to the holding

cell - as if he hadn't believed them - and peering through the empty bars. They were out of earshot of the officers, so Flo stood behind him.

"What's going on Hop?" she prompted. "Is there something we need to be...looking out for?" Yes. He wanted to tell her, but it would put her in unfathomable danger, along with the rest of his unit.

"No...it's personal..." he faltered, making up some translucent excuse for his shock and awe.

"Oh...I'm so sorry Jim..." she consoled. "...I hope everything works out..." her hand rested atop his shoulder reassuringly and his chest nearly tore with guilt. Hop felt sick to his stomach. *How closely were they being monitored? And if they knew Eleven was with them...was it already too late? Had it all trickled down to a matter of time?!* "We've got things here Chief...go home. Get yourself some rest..."

"Yeah...sounds good Flo..." his distance perturbed her as he gazed wondrously about the room. "I'm leaving *you* in charge for the rest of the night," he pointed decidedly at her. And just like that, he was leaving again, out the doors and putting his hat on. Flo turned to grin tiredly at Callahan.

"Looks like you *really* pissed him off..." Powell remarked, snickering to himself.

"What?! You *saw* them! There was nothing I could do! They *HAD* jurisdiction," he exclaimed.

"Maybe next time...wait for the Chief," Flo commented with a nod, watching his taillights wink out of her line of vision. This was a new side of Jim and she wasn't sure she liked it...hoping everything was alright with him at home.

Hopper wasn't sure what took priority anymore...sweeping Joyce's house for bugs or visiting the Wheeler's in hopes of finding *her* there. He rode along Mirkwood, glaring angrily at the looming building tucked comfortably behind the trees and barbed wire. He easily reached speeds of sixty miles per hour, his high beams blazing a path. Mirkwood wasn't long enough to go any faster and slow down quick

enough to turn onto the Byers' street. He found himself walking directly up to their house, grasping the knob determinedly. Effectively giving a sleeping Jonathan the shock of his life, the Chief burst through the door, his silhouette bordered in the fading moonlight. Huxley trotted up to him, barking and sniffing his hands curiously. Once he recognized the man, his tail began wagging and he jumped about at his feet. Hop reached a blind hand down to pet him. "Is she here?" he asked the drowsy teenager without missing a beat.

"...no. She's at the Wheeler's house. I went there to check..." Jonathan's words *immediately* soothed him, mitigating his rising anxiety. Huxley licked his palm in a comforting gesture as Hop's jaw unclenched at the very words.

"Okay..." he sighed, nodding beneath the brim of his hat. Jonathan watched him curiously, noticing dark circles beneath his eyes. He'd also adopted a tired posture, his shoulders standing lower than before.

"Is everything okay?" he couldn't keep himself from asking. There was a silence that drifted between them, ominous and uncertain.

"...no," was the Chief's honest reply. Jonathan's eyes widened at this as his brow creased in the center, his lips parted as he prepared a million more questions. "I'm not really sure..." Hop peered about the room, wondering if they were eavesdropping right now. This made Jonathan's gaze deepen with worry and he hopelessly followed Hop's wandering glances. "I might be back...tomorrow. We have some things to do..." Hop announced in a tired fashion.

"Okay..." Jonathan nodded a little uncertainly. Before he could press any further, Hop had promptly left, slamming the door a little harshly. Huxley lazed beside him on the cushions, yawning sympathetically into his thigh. *If things had gone back to normal...why did he still seem so anxious?* It plagued his mind and he shot to his feet, striding onto his front porch only to watch the patrol car speed off into the night. Jonathan felt a cold anxiety sweep over him, knowing Hop hadn't told them everything. *But what else could he possibly be hiding from them, and for what reason?!* Huxley stood beside him as the moon began its descent, winking out of sight

behind the tree tops.

His headlights dimmed as he stepped from the patrol car, walking tiredly to his small, lakeside home. His hand had already reached up to remove his hat, as it was proper for men to do so before entering any building. While his fingers gripped the brim, he froze in his tracks, noticing his front door hanging ajar. Like a hunter, his eyes widened and his skin ravaged itself with goosebumps...though he felt more like the hunted. He armed himself, gripping his Model 66 Smith & Wesson in the chilled fingers of his right hand. It was nearly sunrise, and a cool mist clung about him like fog, only thinner. Cautiously, he used his shoulder to nudge the door open, only to have it get stuck on something blocking its path. Hop took a step into his house and his boot slid a centimeter or so to the right in a dark puddle. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light of dawn, he noted the maroon color of the thick liquid and froze. His boot continued soaking into the pool of blood and chills ran up his spine. He flicked a light switch but the house remained dark, so he rapidly flicked the switch over and over fruitlessly. "Hello?" he called into the dark rooms, his voice echoing off the thin walls. His breathing shallow and silent, he stepped over the blood, turning to eye a man seated behind the door. His eyes and mouth were still open, a gunshot wound dotting the middle of his forehead. The inside of Hopper's door was splattered with something akin to gray matter, and he recognized it immediately as Lonnie's brain. He stared into the dead eyes a moment, entirely bewildered and apalled. Then something shuffled behind him and he spun around, **"Who is that?!"**

Hop hastily grasped his flashlight, shining a beam of light about the room while taking a step back towards the open door. His heart raced with fear as his brow creased in the center. "What do you **want?!**" he yelled, anger creeping into his voice. A wind washed over him from behind as he peered further into his home, listening intently to the violent quiet. Suddenly a flurry of movement startled him as stray cat **flew** by, shooting out the door. "JESUS..." he groaned, nearly shooting it before it rushed across his lawn and into the forest. After a pent up sigh, he reluctantly turned back to eye the corpse and spotted a note clinging to his leather jacket. Very clearly, in big black writing was a phone number. Hop reached down and snatched it off the jacket, and when the smell hit him he coughed into his sleeve,

striding outside for fresh air. Trying desperately to collect himself, he looked down at the eleven digits scribbled hastily in a bold pen.

He knew exactly what had happened...but how would the public believe his story? Lonnie Byers was dead in his house; he'd been someone Hop disliked, but NOT to the point of cold-blooded murder! The supposed innocence of this quiet town was suffocating him beneath its secrets, and Hop's spine tingled with fear as he gripped the back of his head. He hadn't known Lonnie...not like he had Benny, but it was still unacceptable. What they were doing was heinous... and it terrified him. *Who else would they kill? Why did they think it was a justifiable response?* A pent up scream escaped him as he clenched his fists, slamming them once onto the hood of his car. He pushed himself away from the vehicle, abandoning the crumpled note where his hand had been. Hop didn't even know what to do first: report the death or call the number. His hat trembled slightly in the wind, having fallen from his head in the midst of his fury.

As his mind clouded over, headlights appeared on the horizon. He was too tired to move or hide or try to fight back...he knew it was them. A single Ford LTD Crown Victoria pulled up and a man stepped out, wordlessly opening the backseat car door. He patiently awaited Hop's next move, but the Chief stood still, gazing out at the lake and trying to ignore this unwelcome invitation. "...just let me watch the damn sunrise," he said, fishing in his pocket for a cigarette. He desperately needed one. Rather than saying anything, the man in the light-grey suit approached him and Hop watched from the corner of his eye. He didn't look too dangerous, quite slim actually beneath the well-tailored clothing. Unexpectedly, he stopped beside Hopper and gazed out at the lake, appearing to be completely unarmed and non-threatening. He didn't try anything or watch Hop like the Chief glared at him, he simply stared off towards the sunrise as it spilled across the clear waters like red-orange paint from an overturned can.

"It's beautiful up here..." he said in an unexpectedly calm voice. Hop lit his cigarette, eyeing him suspiciously. It had never occurred to him that maybe...just *maybe*...some of them didn't like their jobs. Perhaps they'd both dealt with things they hadn't signed up for.

"Yeah...it's why I moved here..." Hop trailed off, remembering his thirty-year-old thought process. He'd imagined his job would be

easier compared to his time in the city but now...now he was in too deep, drowning beneath the weight of a corrupted caste system. But for now, they were two normal men gazing out at the sunrise as it peeked longingly over the horizon, having been completely snuffed out in grey for the past week. There would be no clouds today...the sky would lay open and bare...a perfect baby blue for all to see.

"You know what needs to happen..." the man reminded him. His voice was higher than the Chief's and he himself was astonishingly articulate; Hop guessed he was a healthy thirty-five. "Our leader has offered to negotiate. We will get rid of the body and you will hold up on your end of the bargain. Lonnie Byers' death will be ruled as a suicide."

"...another suicide, huh?" Hopper mused almost comically, maintaining his voice in a monotone. "Thought you guys would've spiced things up by now or something..."

"I understand your sentiments...and I apologize for the unfortunate circumstances," the man smiled at him uncharacteristically. Or perhaps...this *was* his true character beneath that light-grey suit; there was no way for Hop to tell. They continued watching the sunrise as it climbed higher into the sky, an unwelcome silence lingering between them amidst the crisp spring air. "I love this time of year...everything comes back to life, so rich and green," he enthused, eyeing the trees and grass. Hop watched him suspiciously.

"I'm a winter kind of guy..." he stated in a hollow tone, taking a drag from the smoke.

"That's ironic, seeing how *flustered* you become at the sight of death..." the man remarked in a dangerously confident manner. "Of course, it's nothing new to you, now is it?"

Hop watched him, blue eyes on brown, exhaling smoke through slightly parted lips. "No. It's not."

"Precisely..." the man nodded, gazing out across the waters. "The thing is, you don't *have* to live out the rest of your days in winter..." Hop's brow creased in confusion at this play on words, his attention now completely centered on the young man beside him. "You could



enjoy *all four seasons* for the rest of your life, if you wanted," he gestured about, sounding more like a salesman than a secret government agent. "Your friends and family could live into their nineties and you could get away from this...*issue*," he extended his hand in a sweeping motion, referring to the corpse laying just inside the house, "practically Scott-free! But you're going to need to cooperate with us. Us scientists...we can only be so certain in regards to the weather..."

"...and if I don't?" Hop asked, maintaining his stony glare.

"...you would certainly regret it; I can promise you that!" The man laughed as if this were a hypothetical matter and not an actual problem, nudging Hop playfully in the shoulder. The Chief stared him down, a burning hatred smoldering in his core. "So...make this easier on yourself. Bring the girl to us, and we can make this all go away. Your lives will go back to normal...as will hers."

"You know...I heard that she took out...what, seven of your guys? All at once," he recalled to the man, watching as he bit his lip and shook his head.

The man shrugged indifferently, "I appreciate the concern, but we've considered those precautions entirely." His cryptic words began to play tricks on Hop's mind, perplexing him into a volcanic rage. "No need to make this harder for yourself. We only want the girl...is that so difficult to understand?"

"Yeah actually...it is," Hop said after a sigh. "She *knows* you're using her and you *still think* she's gonna work for you..." The man shook his head in a tired fashion as Hopper added, "She'd kill you without batting an eye..."

The man smiled a knowing smile, replying with, "We have ways of changing that." A cold sweat started working on Hop's brow as his stomach tightened uncontrollably. This was going nowhere fast; the sun sat completely exposed against the bright morning blue. "Let us take her off your hands. She doesn't understand how things work yet...and you don't want to have to *raise* her yourselves, do you?"

Despite his overwhelming fear, Hop's rage burned inside his chest

cavity, reaching back to grip his spinal cord. His stomach was a furnace, brewing hatred and contempt for everything this man stood for. "Maybe we do," he replied, tossing his smoke to the side. Hop was NOT afraid of this man or any of the people who were a part of this sick "project." What scared him was his involvement and what it meant for Eleven. It seemed they were at a deadlock, and Hopper had *no* means of negotiation. There was nothing they had that he wanted besides washing his hands of Lonnie Byers' blood.

The man released an exasperated breath, "Let's at least...reach some kind of compromise here." He extended an arm to his black Ford in an inviting manner and Hopper's eyes traveled to the car, then back to him. "We have much to discuss..." A moment passed as Hop considered everything, blinking in contemplation at the vehicle. *How dare they offer him a lifeline while he drowns under **their** doing!*

Wordlessly, Hop dragged the toe of his right boot over the lingering smoke, smothering the tiny embers. He eyed the man a final time before reaching down to retrieve his hat, slowly walking towards the vehicle. They passed his own truck and Hop eyed it tiredly, standing beside the Crown Victoria. The man stood with him, his smile gone and replaced with a phony compassionate look. "Lemme ask you something...why'd they send you out here by yourself?"

The man's unsettling smile returned and he shook his head, "See, that's where you're wrong my friend." Hop wanted to look around, as if he'd spot the well-hidden agents, they're polished shoes and tailored suits lingering between the trees. "We took those precautions into mind as well..." he smiled, a comfortable hand resting on the car door. Hop's chest suddenly felt light and airy as he climbed into the backseat, the door closing after him. As the man settled himself behind the wheel, he held a wired-radio up to his mouth and announced, "We're clear. You may now commence the operations."

"Roger that," a voice wrought with static responded as the car grumbled to life. Hop watched as two white Chevy vans began rolling down the road, passing them and heading for his house. His face lay aghast as he watched the trees zip by in a blur of brown and green. It was morning now...the beginning of Spring Break for almost every school in Indiana...probably the entire country. As he wondered about how long he'd be gone – missing from Joyce's life without a

trace – his mind muddled with regret. She wasn't the librarian...she wasn't some short-lived romance or petty fling. It was Joyce, the spectacular mother of two responsible, well behaved children.

Those few moments he'd spent in the hospital with Will had been precious and eye-opening as the boy spoke honestly to him, his eyes vibrant and wide with barely contained energy. Jonathan was a bit more cryptic, but he knew where he was coming from...at least, he hoped he'd be able to learn soon enough. Another wave of regret crashed into him, and he immediately despised himself for getting into the car...though he hadn't been left with many other options.

The facility drifted into view, and the Chief watched as it swelled in size the closer they got. The gates were opened with a simple nod as Hop leered up at the satellites fearfully. He was beckoned from the vehicle, his gun taken from him as he was led through the doors and into the depths of the strange building. "You'll get this back, don't worry," the armored guard assured him in an oddly amiable gesture. He couldn't have cared less, convinced he'd signed his whole life away. They passed a hall with a plastic sheet covering it, and Hopper recognized those same infection symbols. A tiny flicker of hope sparked inside him as he remembered how he'd thought *that* had been his hardest time; how he'd imagined things couldn't get any worse and that he had nothing else to lose...so with a shrug he'd unzipped the marked plastic and headed into the unknown, calling for Will Byers. That was then...now he was back here, handing over a different child to these strange eggheads. Hopper turned down another hallway to spot the tall, mysterious Dr. Brenner waiting outside an interrogation room. Unlike his overtly charismatic coworker, he was **not** smiling.

"Leave us," he ordered the others. They did as they were told without question and Hop walked himself into the room, standing behind one of the two chairs and watching as Dr. Brenner slowly closed the door.

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: Firstly, thank you guys so much for reading this! This is dark...probably the darkest chapter. Hopefully no one liked Lonnie that much. If you did, I apologize for killing him off and promise not to kill anymore characters (though I can't guarantee Brenner's

safety...he's already lucky enough as it is). Tell me what you thought and follow for more chapters/updates! Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*

## 19. The Reveal

### Chapter Nineteen - The Reveal

"Mike?" His eyes were shut tight as he mumbled unintelligibly, his fingers twitching as his brain explored the subconscious realm of his dreams. They did not haunt him any longer...for once, he could sleep soundly. But now was not the time for that, as the sun poured in through his bedroom window, reflecting softly against El's face, wrought with haste.

"Michael?" Karen's voice rang out from below. El turned to eye the door fearfully, getting up to shut it, then rushing back to Mike's side, shaking him.

"Mike..." she plead, her brow pinching worriedly in the center. Unable to think of anything else that could wake him, she pressed her hands against his face and forcefully opened his eyelids with her thumbs. Mike jerked into consciousness, eyeing her accusingly.

"UGH! What are you-?"

"Mike..." El began, her words stopping short upon the opening of the door. Nancy stood within the frame, immediately going over El's face with astounded eyes of blue...lingering longest on the purplish bruise. Her brother watched, petrified and completely awake.

"Nancy! I can explain-" he began, stumbling to his feet.

"No...it's okay...I already knew she was here," she said, shutting the door behind her so their mother wouldn't hear. Her eyes hadn't yet left the girl's face. "Hey..."

"Hello," Eleven smiled a little meekly at her, knowing this was Mike's sister and someone she could trust. "...how...are you?"

Despite their situation, Nancy found herself smiling, sensing El had picked up on a tiny social norm thanks to her. "I'm fine! But...are you...okay? You have a bruise on your..." El's eyes lowered to the carpet meekly.

"She said she doesn't wanna talk about it," Mike broke in, hastily speaking on El's behalf. Truthfully, he'd never asked her how it had gotten there...he'd been too afraid of what the answer might have been. But he could tell it didn't bother her *nearly* as much as it did everyone else. "Now go distract Mom! Please? I have to hide her in the basement!"

"Mike..." El sighed, standing up beside him.

"Yeah?" he asked, his voice immediately softening.

They watched as El shook her head, saying the words, "No more hiding." A short silence ensued as Nancy and Mike glanced thoughtfully at each other.

"Michael? Come down here or your breakfast will get cold!" Karen ordered a second time. A cold doubt gripped him and he shook his head, jiggling his leg anxiously.

He sighed in exasperation, "Nancy I don't know what to do!" El watched him worriedly, eyeing his trembling leg. It seemed pretty simple to her and she began slowly walking towards the door. The siblings didn't seem to take notice. "...what should we say?!"

"I don't know...but I think we should call Ms. Byers. She'll be able to vouch for her *and* explain things to Mom...probably better than we can," Nancy suggested. "You know Will's number, right?"

"Yeah! I can call him right now!" he began fishing around for his notepad – the one with all his friend's phone numbers on it – when he noticed his open bedroom door. "...where's El?" he asked, his eyes widening in horror.

Nancy turned, believing El had just moved to stand behind her for some reason when she'd actually left the room, moving so silently that they hadn't noticed her. The teenager gasped and rushed into the hall with her brother. Karen and Holly noticed this bustling of movement, seated at the kitchen table; they both eyed the stairs curiously. El was already halfway towards the first landing when Mike and Nancy stared at her from above, feverishly beckoning for her to come back. El shook her head, eyeing them fiercely while

Nancy and Mike pleadingly gestured about. "Michael? Is that you?" Karen asked, her voice closer than El had imagined. A bit startled, El decided to ditch her brave plan and rushed back towards Mike who took her hand and led her back into his room. They stood before his closet, and El began shaking her head the instant his hand twisted the knob.

"Please?!" Mike gestured towards the open door.

"No," she shook her head, this being a deal breaker. Rather than argue over this or plead, Mike sighed understandably and grabbed her hand, pulling her with him into the closet and shutting the door.

Nancy had remained on the stairs as Karen looked up at her expectantly, "Where's Michael?"

"Oh...he's just, getting dressed. He'll be down in a minute," Nancy nodded, trying to cover her fib with a knowing smile. When Karen eyed her suspiciously Nancy's reassuring grin deserted her, but despite this her mother returned to the dining room with a sigh. Nancy breathed easy, her eyes drifting shut with relief.

"Is everything okay?" Mike asked in a low whisper. She'd never told him why she was afraid of closed spaces, and he'd never asked. He could barely make out El nodding a silent confirmation, their hands still connected as they crouched in the dimly lit closet. Perhaps it wasn't a fear of being trapped...as much as it was being alone. The bruise – oddly enough – seemed to stick out better in this lighting as Mike eyed it worriedly. "...El?"

"Yes?" They watched each other amidst the shadows as Mike tried to muster his courage.

"...what happened?" he finally asked, pointing to his own cheek as a reference.

El's eyes slipped to the floor, flitting back up to gaze wondrously at Mike. "A fight," she replied evenly, watching Mike's expression change with surprise.

"...was it one of the Bad Men?" he asked. "Did they try to hurt you?"

El shook her head at this, much to Mike's shock. She noticed how his gaze deepened, and he had to ask. The not knowing was killing him. "...who hurt you?"

As El parted her lips to answer, the door swung open and Nancy stared in shock at the two. Mike eyed her incredulously, thoroughly irritated at his sister's curious gaze. "Mom's in the kitchen and she suspects nothing...but, you don't have much time," Nancy informed him.

"Okay," he nodded, rushing down to dial the Byers'. El stood beside Nancy as the older girl softly shut the closet.

"Don't worry. Once Joyce gets here, she can help explain everything to Mom and, *hopefully* you won't have to hide anymore," Nancy explained. Eleven acknowledged this with a small smile, then closed her eyes as her stomach growled loudly. The very audible rumble caught Nancy off-guard. "Whoa, when's the last time you ate?" she asked with a chuckle. El shrugged her shoulders indifferently, making Nancy grin. El wasn't too worried about food at the moment...she mostly wanted to see Joyce again, to let her know she was okay. Nancy watched her as she wandered about Mike's room, sitting on the bed and rearranging his pillows. "I'll...be right back," Nancy gestured, heading into the bathroom. El watched her go, her face opening up a bit with worry until she returned, holding something damp in her left hand. "Does your cheek hurt?" Nancy asked. With a moment's hesitation, El nodded and Nancy tightened her lips, reaching to press the warm cloth to her face. Naturally, the girl drew back at this, eyeing her suspiciously. "It's okay. It'll feel better." Regarding her a little cautiously, El shifted closer and felt the warmth expand throughout the bruised cheek. She closed her eyes and sighed, tilting her head further into the cloth. "Here," Nancy extended it to her and El grasped it to her skin, relishing in the healing warmth. "I'm...sorry..."

"Why?" El asked, confused at Nancy's sudden guilt.

"I'm just sorry that...*that* happened to you..." Nancy said, eyeing her cheek. A moment passed as El turned this over in her head, and she could only think of one appropriate response.



"...thank you," she croaked, her voice seemingly more accustomed to long silences. Nancy nodded, smiling meekly at her as El eyed her warmly. Suddenly, both heads jerked to watch the door as someone entered their house from below. A familiar voice had El dropping the cloth, listening with her mouth parted in awe.

"How did-?" Nancy raised a brow just before El rushed past her, abandoning the cloth on Mike's bed, letting it soak into the mattress. As she plodded down the hall, something in her memory twisted her gut and sent guilty shivers down her spine.

"...there's just something I need to *talk* to you about..." the woman tried to explain, her patience strewn into a tangled, wiry mess.

"Oh that's fine! But, is everything okay...with Will?" Karen asked. Before Joyce could sigh and rub her temples – she knew Mrs. Wheeler would be *full* of questions, some of them, she couldn't answer – she saw *her* clamber down the stairs, freezing on the first landing to stare wide-eyed at her. Thoroughly puzzled, Karen followed Joyce's intense gaze, spotting the strange child for the first time. Nancy appeared behind her on the first landing, watching her mother's expression drastically change. "...who are you?!" she didn't hesitate to ask. El didn't answer, she only stared as Joyce walked closer, squinting her eyes at something marring the girl's face.

"Oh...*honey*..." Joyce shook her head and gasped as El eyed the floor, tears forming. "Look at me," Joyce demanded in a pitched voice. Rather than meet those deep, brown eyes, the girl *avoided* eye contact, every negative emotion rippling across her face at once. This was the first time El did this with Joyce...purposefully looking down and away in a submissive manner. "Come here," Joyce prompted, beckoning her over with a wave of outstretched hands. El did as she was told, walking down the steps and stopping at least four feet from the woman's reach. Her gaze remained passively down-turned as nearly everyone watched this interaction, confused and unsettled at El's reluctance. Nancy eyed Mike from the stairs while he stood in the corner of the room, staring longingly at Eleven. Karen was entirely dumbfounded, her hand still clutching the open door as a gentle breeze drifted in. El could smell Joyce's motherly scent on the wind, wanting more than anything to collapse into her arms and beg for forgiveness. Karen closed the door, seemingly reawakened by the

chill that came with the shifting air. "El..." Joyce began, hoping the girl would stop this foolishness. Instead the girl's face contorted with even more sadness and she shook her head, her moist eyes finally peering up to meet Joyce's.

"I'm sorry..." El apologized, tears slipping down her cheek. She shook her head again as if she were guilty of something, *knowing* Lonnie had been Joyce's friend at one point...and that she'd hurt him.

"No...stop that," Joyce shook her head, stepping forwards to embrace the disillusioned girl, wrapping her in strong, gentle arms. "You have *nothing* to be sorry for."

El didn't understand. The last time she'd done this, she'd thrown Lucas across an open stretch and he'd **slammed** into a rusty vehicle. She had done it to protect Mike, and he'd hated her for it. She could throw people with her mind, yet she couldn't force herself to imagine what it would be like if Joyce hated her. "I hurt...him," she said, eyeing the carpet confusingly. Nancy joined Mike as Karen pointed questioningly at the stranger.

"...who is that?!" their mother demanded in a hushed whisper. Her children were too enraptured to look away or even offer an answer.

"It's *okay*, it's okay...he's a very *bad* man..." Joyce shook her head, closing her eyes as El's tears soaked into her shirt. Then, she gripped El's shoulders in both her hands, holding her out to say, "Whatever he told you, it's not true...and you did the *right* thing. I *know* it..." The bruise haunted her, and it made her never want to leave El home alone ever again. "...and I'm just *so glad* you're okay!" El was pulled back into another embrace as Joyce cradled the back of her head. Mike could see El's brow peak longingly in the center, tears filling between her clenched eyelids as he blinked back tears himself, wiping his eye a little embarrassingly. Joyce eyed her a second time, trying to hold it together, "Everything is better now. Okay? You're not in trouble...you did what you *had* to do and it was *right*."

"Okay..." El nodded, sniffing her sadness away, her gaze never leaving Joyce's face. The woman turned to read Karen's questioning stare and she smiled a little meekly.

"Can we...talk about some things?" Joyce asked, breaking an awkward silence.

"...of-of course!" Karen blurted out, gesturing to their accommodating living room. "Let me just...wake up Ted..." The group shuffled into the Wheeler's company room, choosing spots to sit as Karen rushed upstairs, occasionally peering over her shoulder at Joyce and the girl on her way. El plopped on the couch, clinging to Joyce on her right as Mike sat down to her left. She was all he could watch, wiping his eyes a little too discreetly.

"Mike?" El asked. He looked up at her, trying to hide the fact that he'd been tearing up moments before.

"Yeah?" His voice cracked in a funny tone.

"What's wrong?" she pressed, much to Mike's dread.

"What? Nothing!" he blurted out. Nancy grinned at them from across the room as Holly appeared in the archway.

The youngest walked directly up to Eleven and poked her knee, causing El to jump back with surprise. "Boy..." Holly mumbled in quiet proclamation.

El frowned a little meekly at this as Mike leaned in, "No Holly, this is El. She's a *girl*." Holly eyed her brother incredulously, shaking her head doubtfully at this as she chewed her finger. Joyce and Nancy smiled at this tiny interaction as Mike rolled his eyes, leaning in to whisper, "It's just because your hair is so short." Holly watched absently as El nodded comprehendingly, smiling at Mike (much to his relief). He grinned at this as Holly stepped closer, waving unabashedly at the new person sitting directly in front of her. El watched a little awkwardly, waving back at Holly in a slow, tiny motion. She blinked at the blonde girl, astounded at how short she was. "This is Holly, my baby sister," Mike introduced the young spirit as she placed her tiny hands on El's knee. El smiled, warm with appreciation as Joyce and Nancy shared a contented glance.

"How is...Will doing?" Nancy asked, scooching closer to the woman.

"Oh, he's doing *much* better. He got to come home this morning... from the hospital," Joyce announced.

"That's great!" Nancy smiled. "Jonathan must be so relieved..."

"Yeah...he made him his favorite blueberry pancakes...he was so happy," Joyce said, sighing with relief and clutching El a little closer. The girl leaned her head comfortably against Joyce's arm, unaware just how *mollified* Joyce now was just knowing she was okay. Their arms were intertwined, locked at the elbows as they awaited the rest of the Wheelers' to join them. When they finally did Ted stood in the doorway, staring at the telekinetic child. A vague memory lodged itself in his brain...the same one Karen had sensed the moment she'd seen her on the stairs. They were remembering Dr. Brenner showing them her picture, asking for her whereabouts. *No wonder Karen had been so shaken when she'd woke him.*

"Well hello there!" he broke the silence, smiling and nodding at the girl.

"...hello," El nodded politely at him after a moment's hesitation. Karen sat beside Nancy as Ted planted himself in his recliner, raising a brow as El and Mike eyed each other reminiscently, chuckling quietly amongst themselves.

"I feel like we may have...seen her before..." Karen began, effectively snapping El and Mike from their memories. "...Mike...is she...*that* girl?" El's eyes widened at this, as did Joyce's. The woman sighed as she patted the child reassuringly on the forearm. *This was going to take a while...*

The events of last year were steadily revisiting the Wheelers' as they pieced the broken puzzle together, listening intently to Joyce's explanations and descriptions. Every now and then Karen would eye Ted expectantly, but he usually only shrugged, having made no meaningful connections. Then her eyes would wander over the child's bruised face, studying her sorrowful expression as Joyce laid her life before them, smiling at some parts and closing her eyes at others. "Those...*people* who came here looking for her...they are *not* good people," Joyce warned them.

Karen scoffed knowingly at her husband, "See? I *knew* something wasn't right about them and you didn't even *think* about it!" El's eyes lowered to the floor as the woman added, "Something about that tall one with the white hair just *skeeved* me out..."

"Tell me about it..." Mike broke in with a misplaced chuckle. El eyed him confusingly and his smile *instantly* vanished, his humor deflating like a punctured balloon.

"Well how was I supposed to know they were lying to us?" Ted asked, eyeing her incredulously. "They *were* posing as government officials."

"That's just it..." Joyce shook a finger at them as they watched. "They might actually *be* our government..." Karen and Ted expressed various looks of horror and shock...one being considerably more muted than the other. "They put bugs in Hopper's place once they realized he'd caught onto them...they've killed people..." Joyce shook her head, hoping they could begin to grasp the severity of their situation. "...and they *faked* my son's death."

Karen stared in shock as Ted mumbled, "I think I may have read something about this...some kind of, *experiment*..."

"MK Ultra..." Karen finished his thought unflinchingly as Ted nodded in confirmation.

"Yep! That's the one..." he sighed, peering at the girl behind those enormous glasses.

"Hopper could explain it better...he knows more about it than, well... *most* of us," she shrugged, peering down to check on Eleven.

"Well why doesn't *she* tell us about it?" Ted suggested, gesturing to the girl as her brow raised at him. All eyes were suddenly on her again and her face heated up on its own, her brow creasing nervously.

Joyce searched for the right words, wishing Hopper were here. "I don't think she...knows about it..."

"Well isn't she supposed to be some kind of...spy?" Ted pressed as looks of shock crossed everyone's faces. Joyce only sighed, bringing a

palm to her shaking head.

"*Dad!*" Nancy and Mike both broke in as El looked awkwardly off to the side. Joyce couldn't get a word in, she only watched in confusion as they bickered about. Holly continued chewing her finger, her eyes flitting between her two parents curiously.

"Come on Ted...have a little compassion..." Karen urged in a hissing whisper.

"What?" his voice incredulous. "Wasn't that what the project was about?"

"No...no it's not like that!" Mike finally spoke up, aggravated at how El was peering hopelessly at the floor. "El has powers, okay?" Joyce sighed, her gaze dropping to the floor. She'd hoped she could've used a *smoother* introduction compared to slapping it in their faces.

"...powers?" Karen echoed, raising a brow at her son, who seemed very flustered and upset.

"Yeah! She saved me from falling into the quarry!" he exclaimed, realizing after the fact that he'd said too much. Nancy eyed him surprisingly.

"...what-?" Joyce looked down at her and smiled as El peered back.

"MICHEAL!" Karen's voice rose and they all jumped, El turning to eye Mike worriedly. "That quarry is *dangerous!* We *told* you not to go riding around there!"

Mike eyed her incredulously as his father nodded in half-hearted agreement. "What?! That's not even fair! We were just trying to find her!" he shot back. His parents blinked at him as Joyce eyed him wondrously. "Besides, Nancy fought the monster and you never lectured *her* about it!"

At the very mention of her name, she knew he was drowning her with him. "HEY!" Nancy glared daggers as he rapidly realized she'd never told them.

"You *what?!!*" Karen eyed her disbelievingly. "Fought a...a *monster?!!*"

"H-Hop can explain *everything* when he gets here!" Joyce rose a hand, trying to defuse the nuclear family. Jonathan and her argued once in a while, but not like this...not like the Wheelers'. "I-Is it okay if he comes here and tells his side of the story?"

Karen hadn't stopped glaring at her children as El watched them cautiously, waiting for another volcanic declaration to spew from one of their mouths. Finally, Ted broke the choking silence and asked, "Mike...what exactly do you mean by, *powers*?"

He turned to face El and asked, "Do you think you can show them? Your powers?" Eleven gazed worriedly at them, hoping their reactions wouldn't be as volatile as their arguments. Nancy watched closely, expecting the lights to flicker and for El to close her eyes for a very long time. Joyce and her hadn't yet witnessed her telekinetic feats.

"Okay..." she nodded, searching about the room for something to move. She couldn't decide on anything, so Mike rushed downstairs, much to everyone's surprise. He returned carrying his model of the Millennium Falcon, plopping onto the couch beside the girl. Eleven shifted free of Joyce's embrace, sitting cross-legged as Mike held the spaceship out before him.

He glanced at his parents, "Mom, Dad...please don't freak out..." They watched as El tilted her head downwards, flashing her trademark stare as her mind buzzed with activity.

"We'll try not to..." Ted sighed, convinced it was in his son's head. Karen felt she knew Mike better, and he wouldn't make this much of a scene over something that wasn't real...besides Dungeons and Dragons, that is...

"Ted...Ted what's she doing?" Karen stared as El seemingly froze, her eyes locked on the gray figurine. Mike watched her and suddenly felt the weight of the plastic lift from his fingers, and ever so slowly, he released it. Nancy, Joyce and the Wheeler's all watched, their mouths agape as the spaceship floated midair, actually swaying gently side-to-side. Nancy locked eyes with Mike, everything he'd told her suddenly becoming true and real and not a made-up story. Joyce noticed how El's head barely twitched, wondering if this was hurting

her in some way. Karen and Ted simply stared as Holly giggled from across the room, pointing at the floating object and babbling her amazement. El could see Mike in her peripheral vision, his face open ecstatically. She held it up for a good thirty-six seconds, finally breaking her focus and letting it drop to the floor with a soft sigh.

"See?" Mike exclaimed, turning to smile knowingly at his parents and sister. They didn't smile back, all of them staring worriedly at the girl on the sofa. When he looked back at El, his smile vanished, and he was reminded of the cost her powers demanded. A small trail of blood leaked from her nose, and she seemed paler than usual...but a weak smile crossed her face as she gazed into Mike's eyes, replaying how excited he'd been over and over in her head.

Joyce had figured it would startle her...but Hop had already told her about the moment she'd woken up and thrown him across the room. Plus, what she'd done to defend herself...all of it had manifested itself in this one tiny action, and she was suddenly faced with the risks it brought. "Honey are you okay?" Joyce checked, noticing the nosebleed and gasping.

"Oh..." Mike's mother seemed to snap from some kind of state at the sight of blood. "Oh my goodness," Karen rose to fetch a cloth as Ted cleaned his glasses with his shirt. Nancy blinked, noticing El's pallor and creasing her brow. Too tired to try and say anything, El looked to Mike longingly, and he seemed to pick up on this wordless cue.

"Whenever El uses her powers, she gets drained," Mike explained to his parents as his mother returned with a cloth. "She needs to rest and recharge, and I think it helps if she eats too..." Mike stated a little loosely, peering over at her. El nodded tiredly in confirmation as Mike shared a small smile with the spent girl. Ted rubbed his eyes, still wondering if he'd even seen it correctly.

"Here you go," Karen knelt down to dab gingerly at the child's nose. For a moment, El was taken aback by how pretty Mike's mother was, even this close. Eleven gratefully took the cloth, nodding at her tiredly as Karen stood in the center of the room. "Well...we *have* French toast waiting in the kitchen," she announced with a sigh. Joyce's first instinct was to insist that she shouldn't, still in a rush to return home to Jonathan and Will. But she saw how close El and



Mike had grown, knowing this was one of two safe places for the young girl. "I'll go make some more," Karen stated, walking back into the kitchen. Ted followed her as they spoke in low voices, debating what to do with this earth-shattering information.

"Wow..." Nancy finally spoke as they all turned to face her. "That was...actually pretty awesome," she noted with a chuckle, smiling astoundingly at the girl. El smiled back, her eyes still glazed over with fatigue and her mind swimming with dizziness. Mike grinned with her, surprisingly relieved that the secret was out and his parents knew. Eleven leaned into Joyce once again, sighing with exhaustion and closing her eyes as Mike peered over his shoulder and into the kitchen. Now, he only hoped they'd tolerate her presence in his life... in *their* lives. His stomach fluttered with excitement at the very thought of Eleven reuniting with Lucas and Dustin. He wondered if she'd recognize Will after all this time, barely containing his anticipation.

Joyce had been tapping her heel against the carpet for a solid minute now. "I'm gonna try Hop's phone," she sighed, rubbing her shoulder before leaving El on the couch to find Mike's phone. Nancy rose to show her the way as El sank back into the cushions, still a bit drowsy.

"You okay?" Mike checked, poking her hand with a finger. El nodded, watching him blankly as he smiled a tad bashfully at her. With him, she was like a mirror; smiling whenever he did, sharing his tears, and (mostly) chuckling whenever he laughed. "You were right. This feels better than having to hide you all the time," Mike mused. He still had questions...*plenty* of questions for Joyce and Hopper, even Eleven... but right now, he wanted to enjoy this morning, and look forward to this afternoon. He couldn't deny it...after seeing Dr. Brenner on the television. The bad men occasionally lurked about in the back of Mike's mind, but Eleven brought up the front, retaining *all* of his immediate attention.

Joyce tried four more times to call Hopper...to no avail. His phone didn't even receive the calls she sent, so she tried the station. "Hawkins Police," a female voice greeted her.

"Hi! This is...J-Joyce Byers..." she replied with haste. "I was wondering if...Jim Hopper was there and if I could talk to him..."

Flo's eyes closed regretfully, "Sorry Joyce...he hasn't come in yet."

"Oh..." she sighed, her voice painted with all the worry she couldn't hide. "Well, if he gets there, could you ask him to-to call me, right away?"

"Of course," Flo nodded, eyeing the two officers as they sipped their coffee. She eyed the pot, noticing how they'd left enough inside for Hop to drink when he came in...if he came in. "I wouldn't worry too much about it Joyce. Jim is...typically a *late* riser. He's usually one of the last people to walk through these doors in the morning," she tried to console her humorously.

"Thank you so much..." Joyce sighed, deriving a tiny semblance of comfort from this statement.

"Alright," Flo nodded. "You take care of yourself Joyce." Wishing she knew this woman's name, she closed her eyes, biting her lip and nodding.

"...you too," she replied, softly setting the earpiece onto the receiver.

"Breakfast's ready!" Karen called them into the kitchen, having Ted set up two extra chairs. He held another one in his hands as they shuffled into the kitchen, eyeing Joyce expectantly.

"We have more food. Do you want me to set this chair for Hopper?" Karen sighed, wishing Ted would simply set it without asking despite the limited table space.

El eyed Joyce as the woman sighed tiredly, "No...no you don't have to. I-I don't think he's coming..." The girl frowned at this, immediately detecting some underlying issues as they continued to plague Joyce's mind. Mike took El's utensils without asking and began cutting her food. When he noticed her questioning glare, he stopped his movements, happily offering her the knife and fork. Joyce watched and smiled as she cut the thick pieces of battered bread ...as best she could. El then placed her silverware back beside her plate and took a piece in her hand. Before she brought it to her mouth, she watched Mike's attention-grabbing stare, reading his eyes. *Follow me*, they said. She copied him as he stabbed his food, *then*

brought it to his mouth. They smiled, chuckling at each other and *beyond* grateful for the others' presence. Joyce shifted about, uncomfortable with the quiet atmosphere. The Byers' *always* talked at the table; it was simply second nature. But this wasn't even about that...Joyce was hoping they wouldn't refuse Eleven and that they could keep discussing the vital matters at hand.

When they were about halfway through the meal, El spoke up, surprising everyone by breaking the violently awkward silence. "Mike?"

"Yeah?" he brought his cup of milk to his lips, eyeing her over the rim. Karen had just finished cutting a piece for Holly, feeding her before she fed herself.

"What...is fuck?" Nancy stopped chewing, a horrified gaze slowly creeping its way over to Eleven. Mike coughed into his drink as it splashed onto his face and hair. Joyce gasped as Karen nearly dropped the fork onto Holly's plate.

"YOUNG LADY!" she exclaimed, gripping the silverware. El jumped, her eyes widening. Mrs. Wheeler wanted to cover Holly's ears, but in her mind, the irreparable damage had already been dealt.

"Language!" Ted groaned through a piece of French toast.

"I am *SO* sorry Karen!" Joyce immediately apologized, waving her hands in front of her.

"EL!" Mike hissed in a hushed voice, grimacing whilst wiping the milk from his dark hair and mouth. *How many **more** times would she make him do that?*

"What?" she whispered back, brow raised alarmingly.

"That's a **bad word**..." he explained, hoping it sank in. "We're **not** allowed to say that...*ever*."

"Oh..." she eyed the table. "...why not?" El asked after a moment of stunned silence.

"BECAUSE..." Karen spoke, her voice still quite loud at the profanity.

"...it's not proper. It's filthy..." Holly watched, thoroughly entertained with whatever had just happened.

"Yeah, *and* just plain rude," Ted muttered behind his orange juice.

"Where did you even *hear* that word?!" Joyce asked, chuckling nervously as El turned to eye her.

"...a bad man..." El replied, not knowing his name. The table went quiet as El peered about at them, her gaze eventually lowering to Joyce's knife. A deep frown settled itself on her face as she felt the sting of everyone's judgement for the first time.

"Well...it was bound to happen eventually..." Nancy tried to break the silence with a realistic joke, simpering at them all. Her mother and father eyed her suspiciously and the girl slowly returned to her meal, gritting her teeth. "...sorry..."

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: OKAY...that took forever! I wanted the characters to catch a break with all the craziness going on, so I hope you guys enjoy this chapter. Fret not, the story is FAR from over. There are still things to be dealt with, pressing matters to attend to, ships to sail...etc. Thank you for reading! Follow for more chapters and tell me what you think! Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*

## 20. Brain Candy

### Chapter Twenty – Brain Candy

Will watched as his brother scooped another handful of the tiny dark fruits into his palm, spreading them generously onto the cooking pancake batter. "See, you gotta make sure every inch has at least one blueberry in it," his brother mused, squinting at the solidifying liquid.

Will grinned playfully, "I didn't know it was such a science."

Jonathan chuckled at this and nodded, "Uh, yeah it is! Blueberry pancakes are no small feat...you gotta make sure they don't burn..." He trailed off, taking the time to flip a few cakes to eye the glorious golden brown.

"Can I flip that one?" Will asked, reaching eagerly for the spatula with the wooden handle.

"Go for it!" he smiled, handing it over as Will switched places with him. The younger boy ended up flipping it onto one of the other cakes, chuckling at the grilling food.

"Oh no..." he chortled, trying to scrape the uncooked batter off the cake. Gobs of it still clung to the warm side, white against dark as the boys snickered lightheartedly at Will's failed attempt. The youngest sighed, grinning at his brother as he took the spatula from him and expertly corrected his error.

"Don't worry. One day, this'll be a piece of cake," Jonathan grinned as Will rolled his eyes.

"Oh God...you're *killing me*..." he groaned at his brother's horrible pun.

"What?!" Jonathan eyed him, laughing despite not catching what he'd said like Will had.

"Just...just nothing..." Will shook his head at him, still grinning at Jonathan's obliviousness. The eldest scooped the cakes onto a serving platter, reaching back to set the steaming food onto the table. As he

was fishing about for two glasses, opening the fridge door with one hand, Will's eyes widened and his posture stiffened considerably. His gut clenched uncomfortably and he grimaced at the familiar sensation. "I'll be...right back..." he mumbled, holding his stomach and slowly exiting the room.

"Hmm? You okay?" Jonathan asked, peering over the door of the fridge. He set a gallon of milk onto the table, peeking out of the kitchen as Will shuffled down their hall and into the bathroom. "Will?"

"...I'm fine!" he replied, though his voice sounded burdened by a heavy object. Jonathan creased his brow, remembering Joyce's words to him before she'd left for the Wheeler's this morning.

*"Make sure he gets enough to drink and eat...okay? And if **anything** happens, call me **right away**...okay?" she checked, fishing about in her wallet for some gas money. Will was sound asleep in his room, having come home only a few hours before.*

"Sure, sure..." he nodded in confirmation. "But Mom...didn't the doctors say he was gonna be alright?"

*Joyce sighed, shaking her head and rubbing her forehead. "No, no...they said they **didn't know** what was wrong with him..." Jonathan noticed how frazzled she was, wishing she could stop and rest for at least a few moments. "I have to go see if El is okay..." Joyce exhaled, her voice trembling a bit with worry.*

"Mom..."

"Then I have to...buy gas for the car...and call Hopper, and-"

"Mom!" Jonathan broke in, his hands going to her shoulders. "It's gonna be **okay**. Nancy told me she was there...she's **safe**," he explained a second time as Joyce nodded, sighing into the air between them. "Just try and relax a little...Will's obviously healthy enough for them to let him come home."

"...I know, I know..." Joyce rehearsed, nodding assuredly at her son. She gazed up at her eldest, confident in him and everything he did. "Thank

*you Jonathan..."*

*"Sure..." he nodded. "I'm just happy he's better now..." he admitted his fears as her expression reflected the exact same sentiments.*

*"Me too..."*

The sound of Will's groans reached him from the bathroom, all the way into the kitchen. "...Will?" Jonathan went to hesitantly peek into the open door and found his brother leant against a wall, clutching his stomach with both forearms. His gut wrenched and burnt with pain, a tearing sensation making his jaw clench shut. Stressed moans and panting were Jonathan's only indication that something was amiss. "Will what's wrong?" he asked, grabbing his shoulder protectively. The anguish of seeing his brother like this painted itself across his face in lines and creases.

"Ugh..." Will groaned, his voice rising in alarm as the pain came to a head. Tears formed in his eyes as perspiration slicked his skin. "...it HURTS...it **hurts so bad!**" he exclaimed, sinking onto the floor whilst gripping his stomach.

"Let me get you some water!" Jonathan offered, filling a cup with tap from the sink beside them.

"NO!" Will huffed, shaking his head. "That only makes it-" The boy's eyes widened in alarm as the pain left his stomach and began traveling up through his abdomen. This was his only warning, and he ordered his brother, "Get out!"

"W-What?! Why?" Jonathan asked, peering down at him worriedly.

"Just do it!" he stammered, somehow keeping it down long enough to utter these words.

Jonathan eyed him, then the toilet worriedly. "O-Okay, I'll be right outside..." He rose to his feet and closed the door, rushing into the kitchen to put the milk away. On top of everything else that was going on, they couldn't afford letting their food spoil. Will stood to lock the door, gripping the sink and grimacing into the mirror. He battled with his body for a few solid minutes, yearning to be rid of

the unwelcome passenger while dreading the stress that came with hurling it up. Then, without warning or any sort of preparation, he vomited a slug into the bowl. Through blurred vision, he noticed it was quite larger than the last. He caught his breath, his eyes pink with exertion and his temples pulsating painfully. The last time he'd done this, Will had drank water and it'd helped the slug crawl out of his throat, quickening the grueling process. So, he'd decided not to drink water for a bit...and it'd parched his throat considerably. Will sucked in a deep breath, noting how (this time) he'd nearly *choked* on the wriggling abomination. *Next time...take the water*, he told himself. He remained clutching the sink, gasping for air and collecting himself.

"Will?" Jonathan asked through the door. He could hear the sink running and Will's panting, as if he'd just run a mile. "...everything... come out okay?"

Will sighed at this, replying with an unconfident and shaky, "No..."

"Should I come back later...?" Jonathan looked down at the knob leeringly as it rotated. Will stood before him, an unusual paleness smothering his skin in a ghastly color.

"I'm fine..." Will lied, trying to dress it up with a tired smile.

"No...you're **not**," Jonathan corrected him, feeling his forehead with the back of his hand. Will rolled his eyes, reaching up to slowly remove Jonathan's hand when his brother's eyes swelled with shock. "You're *freezing*!" he exclaimed, having expected him to be burning with fever.

"It is kinda cold in here..." Will reasoned, shuddering to himself. "Your hands could just be hot from cooking, too..."

"Maybe..." he trailed off, eyeing the floor worriedly. "...could you eat?" The boy shuddered noticeably.

"...I think so..." Will nodded after a moment's hesitation.

"You don't have to! Only if you think you can handle it..."

"I think I can..." Will said in a more reassuring tone. "I'm actually



starving..." he chuckled at the ironic emptiness hollowing his stomach. Jonathan tried to smile with him, but he could only purse his lips fretfully as his brother half-smiled in a comforting gesture.

"Okay..." he finally nodded, walking into the kitchen and sitting with him at the table. He watched Will in a safeguarding manner, curious as to how he'd been thoroughly sick moments ago only to be chowing down on *pancakes* minutes later. "...at least you don't have to worry about school," Jonathan noted, the optimism in his words cutting down his doubt.

"Yeah!" Will nodded, wholeheartedly agreeing with him as he cut the fluffy hotcakes. Jonathan smiled as Will relished the food, closing his eyes to savor each bite. "You make these the *best*. Don't tell Nancy I said this, but...you make better pancakes than Mrs. Wheeler..."

"What?! No way..." Jonathan rolled his eyes at this excessive flattery. "You *do* know she's an *actual* cook, right? There's *no way* I could make something better than her..."

"You guys should have a cook-off, breakfast food only. I wouldn't wanna risk anything...but I'd put my money on you," he chuckled, nodding honestly at his brother.

"Maybe, one day..." Jonathan mused, chuckling at the mere idea.

"So, have you talked to Nancy yet?" Will popped the question, derailing Jonathan's thoughts on a dime.

The teenager blinked, "...about what?"

"...*you know*..." he grinned, wiggling his brow and squinting at him. Jonathan watched, smiling a bit in his confusion.

"Wait what?! What are you-?"

"Jonathan..." he sighed, shaking his head. "Mom and I know you *like* her..." he droned on the word *like* just to tease his older brother. "Well...*I* know. I'm actually not sure if Mom knows..." Jonathan was going to say something but he remained silent, his face uncontrollably shading three pigments darker. "Why don't you ask her on a date?" Will asked, knowing his brother could. "There's that

concert coming up..."

"H-How'd you find out about that?!" Jonathan burst in. "It was supposed to be a surprise!"

Will rolled his eyes, "Well, I found the *surprise* on the coffee table last week..."

"Oh..." Jonathan berated himself for leaving the tickets in plain sight. *How idiotic of him!* "But...it's *The Clash*," Jonathan reminded him. "I was gonna take *you* to go see them..."

Will sat in silent contemplation for a moment, his lips pursing thoughtfully. What he really wanted was to discuss his sickness with his friends and see if they could make any breakthroughs about the slugs. "...it's okay. You should take Nancy."

"...but Will, you actually **like** *The Clash*," he reinstated, eyeing him confusingly. "Nancy might not even be into that kind of music..."

Will shrugged, "They're only gonna sing the songs from the mix-tape you gave me anyway. Plus, it'll probably sound worse live...no offense..."

Jonathan shrugged indifferently at this true fact. He couldn't deny that his brother had a point...but he was still very distraught over this. He sighed in a downtrodden manner, "It was supposed to be a surprise...for you."

"It's *okay*." Will went on to add, "Besides, Mom wouldn't let me go to a concert, with everything that's been happening. I'd be lucky enough to go to Mike's place..." Jonathan nodded at this understandably, lowering his gaze to the table. "So ask Nancy! She might not like them, but...who knows if she's even *been* to a concert? You know?"

"Yeah..." Jonathan smiled at his little brother, who was beginning to sound more and more like an adult every day.

"Mike said he would finish the campaign soon and...I don't wanna miss it in case he does," Will informed him as Jonathan chuckled to himself. *No...not an adult. Not yet at least...*

Joyce knelt before Eleven in the bathroom, speaking in a low voice to her. She was gently rubbing El's cheek with a warm washcloth as the girl sat on the lid of the toilet, eyeing the bruise angrily. "I *swear* if I see Lonnie again I am gonna *murder* him..." she muttered. El tightened her lips at this, having believed she'd already done so when she'd thrown him across the kitchen. Joyce looked down, eyeing the sad-looking bandages and back up at El. The girl stared at her cautiously until Joyce said, "We have to fix them." The woman set about the tedious task of changing the bandages as El flinched every now and then, biting her lip at the pain. She cleansed them with a different washcloth as El gripped the toilet, clenching her teeth, her brow trembling. "Almost done," she promised, helping herself to the Wheeler's first-aid kit a little carelessly. She had to admit, Eleven was doing good. Then again, the first time they'd done this, El had been half-starved and beyond consolation, skittish at every little sound. Now, their bellies were full and Eleven knew she had a home...a warm one, with family that cared for her. Joyce wrapped El's feet comfortably in soft gauze, returning them to the floor. Then she grabbed the first cloth, refocusing her attention on El's face.

"Joyce..." El began in her usual soft-spoken tone.

"What?" she replied, peering into those bright brown eyes.

"...my friends," she gazed over her shoulder at the door as Joyce followed her cheek with the cloth. "Can I, be with them?" she asked, turning back to the woman longingly.

A deep pit formed within her core, and Joyce bit her lip, eyeing her feet worriedly. El watched, her face wrought with concern. "...you wanna stay here for a bit? Then come home tonight?"

"Yes," El nodded. She understood Joyce's fears, so she tried to console her. "Mike...he's here."

"Yes I know..." Joyce sighed, continuing to rub her cheek.

El suddenly said something out of the blue and entirely unconnected to Joyce's train of thought. "I'll protect him..." she vowed, making Joyce stare at her in awe.

"Oh, I *know* you will sweetie..." Joyce cooed, hugging El to her chest. This girl simply didn't understand that people cared and worried *about* her. "Are you sure you're gonna be okay here? I'd only be at home, with Will and Jonathan...you could call me and I can come and pick you up *whenever* you want." El nodded, gazing longingly into Joyce's eyes as they lowered to the floor again. The bandages haunted her. *Was she being a good caretaker, leaving El here with another family?!* "...okay then," she accepted the request and El's face lit up. She hugged Joyce on her own accord, wrapping her in two tiny arms.

"Thank you," she said into Joyce's shoulder. The woman knew it wasn't this easy. She'd need to talk it over with Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler before *anything* happened.

"I have to ask Mike's parents first...since this is *their* house," Joyce reminded her. "...if they say no, then we have to leave," Joyce said. El nodded understandably, looking a little doubtful now herself. "Here, keep this," she slipped the cloth into El's hand and kissed her left cheek. Joyce could see there was a little confusion in her eyes at this simple motherly gesture, but it seemed to comfort her either way. "You go see your friends, in case we *do* have to leave..."

"Okay," El nodded, shaking the question from her mind. She'd already pressed her luck during breakfast with her first question, and El found a bit of solace knowing she could ask Joyce later. They both left the bathroom and El rushed downstairs, finding Mike sitting on the couch, holding his super-comm to his jaw. She looked over at her fort, realizing it had sat...exactly the same as when she'd last slept there. It appeared untouched.

Her eyes went back to Mike as he pressed a button, saying, "Lucas! Are you there? Lucas, come in! Over."

El crossed the room, sitting beside him as he smiled warmly at her. As the rag began to lose it's warmth, she placed it on the table. Lucas' voice came through the comm, distorted with static and sleep. "Yeah...what is it?"

"I need you to get Dustin and come over her, quick! Over!" Mike demanded.

Lucas sighed, then pressed down the button, "I was *trying* to sleep in, but I guess I can come over..." There was a moment's pause as he rolled his eyes and added, "...over."

"Great! Make sure you bring Dustin. Over," Mike reminded him unnecessarily. The breaks in his sentence were only slightly confusing as the girl watched him adoringly.

Lucas paused, "...is Will gonna be there?"

"...Yeah! I'll call him and see if he's feeling better..." Mike nodded into the radio. "-over!"

"Good...that way we'll have the *whole* party and we can *finally* finish the campaign," Lucas sighed, snatching his figurine off his bedside table and searching about for clothes to wear. "...over!"

"...oh yeah! Definitely, over," Mike chuckled, glancing to El excitedly. He couldn't wait to see the looks on their faces when they spotted her.

Lucas squinted at this, eyeing a wall suspiciously. "Umm...okay. Over and out." He retracted the antenna as Mike switched channels, extending his reach with the supercomm.

"Will? Will are you there? Over," Mike's voice came in through Will's super-comm as he hastily snatched it off his bed.

"Roger that! I'm here, over," he responded, much to Mike's surprise.

"Hey!" Mike's voice pitched with glee. "How...how's it going? Over..."

Will tilted his head back and forth, "It happened again this morning, but I think that's it for today...over."

Mike eyed El, continuing to ask, "You mean, you puked again? Over?"

"Yeah...it was really bad..." Will trailed off. "-over..."

"Where'd you...put it? Over..." Mike asked as El eyed him confusingly.

"In the sink...I didn't have time to go anywhere else...over," Mike noticed El's expression and decided to cut to the chase.

"Well...do you think you'll be allowed to come over today? I asked Lucas and Dustin, so we might be able to play D&D for a bit. Over."

Will shifted about with anticipation, "Well...I'd have to ask Jonathan if he can drive me..." Mike eyed the floor, knowing Will probably didn't feel strong enough to bike himself there. "...but yeah! I'll ask. Over."

"Your mom is actually here; you can ask her! I can put her on the radio and-"

"NO," Will broke in, his eyes widening. "No...I'd rather take my chances with Jonathan...o-over."

Mike grinned, "O-Okay. See you in a few? Over?"

"Yep! Over and out," Will nodded, smiling to himself and retracting his antenna.

Mike did the same, turning to El and asking, "Isn't this exciting?" She nodded a little nervously, questions still lingering on the tip of her tongue. "You look...confused about something," Mike observed as El's eyes found the floor a moment, then flitted back up to him. "What is it?"

"What's...puking?" El asked.

"Oh..." Mike nodded. He went on to ask, "...have you, never puked before?" El shrugged, her brow raising unknowingly. "Oh...well, it's when your stomach hurts really bad and you...um," he struggled, trying to describe it clearly. "...cough up, everything you ate and...spit it out."

El grimaced a little comically at this, "Nasty..."

"Yeah! It is...*really* gross," he mused, a little too excited to be explaining the mechanics of vomiting to her. Mike was simply ecstatic that they were in the same room, so he pressed, "Do you have any other questions?"

El thought about this, her face heating up. She looked off to the side, pursing her lips. "Not...really..." she shook her head, peering back over to him.

"...come on El, I know you do," he chuckled. "It's okay! You can ask me. I won't judge you!"

El smiled, hoping to replace her actual question with another less-intriguing one. "What is...campaign?" she landed on the foreign word.

"Oh...it's like, a story that you follow during a game," Mike explained, smiling knowingly at her. El blinked at this, her brow pinching in the center and he knew something was up. "...what?"

"...what is game?" she asked again, thoroughly confused and a little guilt-ridden. Mike eyed her a moment, realizing how deprived she was of the normalcy he was privileged to every day.

"...oh. It's...something you play with your friends to have fun. Like...I have a game we can play right now! I can show you," he offered, rising to his feet excitedly. She watched him and absently nodded, wishing she could partake in his excitement. "Okay! I'll be right back," he said before rushing to fetch two pencils and paper. Clambering up the stairs, he could hear the parents' hushed voices as they discussed the more delicate matters of Eleven's past.

"...Hopper knows more about it," he could hear a shred of Joyce's explanation, and as he passed the room, their voices quieted. His brow creased irritatingly and he hastily grabbed two sheets and stole two pencils from his dad's desk, descending the stairs and returning to Eleven. Before she could ask what was bothering him, he drew two pairs of parallel lines, making them intersect perpendicularly. It reminded her of the face of an ego as El's eyes widened and Mike handed her a pencil.

"Okay, so...this is called Tic-Tac-Toe. Do you want to be X's or O's?"

El stared blankly at him, randomly picking, "O's..."

"Okay! I'll be X's," he said. "That means I go first," he drew an X in the

center-most square. "The object is to connect your letter's in a line of three, using these boxes," the eraser end of his pencil waved over the boxes as El watched closely. "Like this," he went ahead and drew three X's in a row, connecting them all with a line through their vertices. "You can do it up and down, sideways, or diagonally, like this," he showed her each way as her eyes pored over the squares. Her mind worked on this, and she blinked at the wonderful sensation that always came with learning something new. Her mind eagerly devoured this new information, starved of it for years now. "We each take turns, but X's always start. You wanna try it?" She nodded, confident she'd figured it out. "Okay! You be X's this time," he nodded, drawing a new set of squares. El smiled and drew an X in the center, just as Mike had before. She watched as Mike placed a circle directly above her X, and she – without hesitation – drew another in the top right corner. *She's going to go diagonal*, he thought, placing an O in the bottom left corner. Expertly, she drew an X in the middle right box, looking up at him victoriously. It took him a moment, and when he noticed her strategy he glanced up to stare at her in awe.

"Your turn," she said, grinning at him a little knowingly. Chuckling, he drew a random circle in the middle left box and she finished her vertical line of X's in the right column, softly smiling at him.

"Aw! You beat me!" he mused, laughing unexpectedly as she smiled back.

"Again?" she asked, shifting anxiously beside him.

"Sure!" he nodded, watching as she drew the squares this time, awaiting his next move. He smiled, witnessing her true intelligence shine through years of mundane routine. Eleven's ability to learn new concepts and ideas set her above the rest in terms of mental capacity...it was something that came along with her psychokinetic powers. Instead of having to be shown something multiple times – like most children her age and younger – she simply memorized it the first time and was able to reproduce it numerous times afterwards. "Here, I have an idea!" Mike shot to his feet, rushing to his garage to sort through his father's old college textbooks. He found a copy of *Webster's Dictionary* and returned, slamming the thick text onto the table before them. This is when El's expression changed as Mike flipped open to the A section; language was...difficult for her. Having



been so isolated her entire life, she never spoke enough as a *young* child to nurture her vocal abilities, so in this subject, her ability plateaued. Mike saw past this, certain El could learn new words as easily as she could patterns and actions. "This is a dictionary," he introduced the enormous book, tapping the pages. El eyed it wearily as Mike continued, "It's like...a big list of all the words we know. It tells you what they mean...like, here!" He flipped to the word *game* and read the definition out loud, "...an activity engaged in for diversion or amusement." He looked up at her only to notice her newly lost expression.

"...di-version...?" she repeated hopelessly. Mike watched as her eyes went over the words, squinting at the tiny text.

"...can you read it?" he asked. Eleven eyed him worriedly, shifting closer to the book and staring at the font meekly. Eventually she looked up at him, frowning a bit. It wasn't that she couldn't read...she could definitely read *some* of them...but there were too many gaps in the sentences filled with unknown verbs and nouns to breakeven. Mike picked up on this, shrugging as he closed the book. He chuckled, "I get it...it's too much like school to be any fun." El simpered as Mike pressed her anxiety, hoping to dissolve it completely. "El?"

"Yes?"

"What happened...at breakfast, was *okay*," he assured her. She looked doubtful of this, eyeing the blue book disdainfully. "People make a *lot* of mistakes, *all* the time! It's okay if you don't know something...it doesn't make you *any* less smart than us," he consoled her. His ability to know *exactly* what was pestering her simply blew her mind as she blinked at him, her expression one of discreet, overwhelming adoration. "My mom...she, *freaks* out like that with everyone. It's not just you..." he added, chuckling at a childhood memory. "My dad doesn't really care, but...yeah! You should've *seen* how she flipped out on Nancy the first time she accidentally cursed at the table," Mike continued. He stood to place the book beside El's fort, turning back to her and saying, "If you ever wanna go through it, just ask me or Nancy. We'll be glad to help as much as we can," Mike smiled at her as she gazed fondly at him. "...I mean, there are some words in here that even Nancy doesn't know about!" He chuckled, tapping the book

and shaking his head, "Before now, we haven't really used it that much...it was kind of, for homework emergencies only..." El followed him as he rambled on, entering a room dusty with objects strewn everywhere, packed in brown boxes. He noticed her wandering glances, her eyes wide with curiosity. "Oh! This is the garage," he gestured about, realizing he'd never shown her this room during her first tour of the house. "It's where we keep all our old junk and bikes..." he noticed her reaching down to pick up a baseball, turning it over in her hands. "That's my dad's baseball. He used to play games with it when he was in high school and a little during college, and then he stopped."

"Why'd he stop?" she asked, running her thumb over the red stitches.

Mike shrugged, "I don't know...I guess it just, wasn't fun for him anymore..." El pursed her lips, gazing down at the weathered ball in her small hands. Mike's face lit up, "We can play catch later, if you want." She smiled and nodded, handing him the baseball as if it were a precious gem. Once he had it, he bounced it against his palm a few times, then tossed it into a random box. El watched it fly through the air and land squarely within the cardboard. "Yes! Ten points!" Mike cheered in a hushed whisper. El gave a soft chuckle as she continued exploring the room, Mike trailing close behind her. He was eager to tell her what the new objects were. Then, a familiar knock had both their heads jerking towards the door. "That must be Lucas and Dustin!" Mike exclaimed, rushing to open the door.

He stood in the doorway, blocking their view as they held their bikes beside them. "Hey man..." Lucas greeted him. Dustin was still catching his breath, looking more than a little distressed about something.

"Hey! So, guys...there's a surprise waiting for you inside," Mike said in a hushed tone. Lucas and Dustin raised their eyebrows respectively.

"Is it...a new monster?" Lucas guessed, eyeing him a little strangely. Mike was...happier than usual and it deeply perturbed him. Plus, he was still planted before them, blocking their way.

Dustin's eyes swelled as he asked, "Oh! Did your mom bake those

snickerdoodle cookies?! They were SO good last time..." Lucas rolled his eyes as Mike chuckled.

"No! No, it's...you'll see," Mike trailed off, unable to wait any longer. Their expressions changed as they tried to process this hint and Mike slowly opened the door...the answer standing before them. Dustin's eyes lit up as Lucas stared in awe at the girl, bruised and battered...but alive nonetheless. And here. She was here, and not *there*.

"No way..." Lucas droned, rapidly blinking as if she were some fierce hallucination.

"Holy shit..." his profanity caught them all off-guard as El noted his slightly deeper voice. "YOU'RE ALIVE!" Dustin exclaimed, recklessly throwing himself at Eleven, capturing her in a crushing hug. She hugged him back, beaming at Mike as he laughed giddily. "Oh my God...I can't believe this!" Dustin went on to express his amazement. "How...? But you...?" he trailed off, glancing at Mike as the boy shrugged indifferently. He turned back to the girl as she eyed him warmly, "...oh, what the hell! I guess it doesn't really matter!" Eleven eyed Lucas as he approached her, blinking in shock. He stopped before the girl, feeling a *tad* guilty about the way he'd treated her before she'd left.

"What you did...was **brave**. You really did save us...*and* you saved Will," Lucas restated, his eyes turning somber as he softly shook his head. "I'm just sorry, we couldn't save you..." They remembered his valiant – though unquestioningly futile – efforts to stop the Demogorgon, and it had been those efforts that inspired her to put an end to her running. Their uncontainable energy gave her strength and she'd repaid them tenfold, sacrificing herself for their safety. Everyone's eyes went to the floor, all except Eleven's.

"It's okay," she assured him, maintaining her gaze. What she'd done...that night last November; she hadn't expected to survive it, *at all*. She'd done it to save *them*, her courageously loyal friends who'd defended her through it all. At that time, it was her turn to be the warrior.

"She's here now, right?" Mike enthused, trying to lighten the mood.

"Yeah!" Dustin chimed in as El offered Lucas another smile.

"...yeah. You're right," Lucas nodded, embracing the heroine. They separated, a stern look on Lucas' face as he said, "You're still a weirdo..." They eyed him confusingly for a moment until he broke into a tired grin, adding, "...but you're *our* weirdo. And to be honest," he eyed Toothless and Frogface as they watched him closely, grinning at this welcoming gesture. "...you fit *right* in with us," he nodded assuredly. Mike laughed as Dustin pretended to leer at him, eventually breaking into childish giggles. Lucas patted her on the shoulder, nodding in a gesture of respect and trust. Then he turned to his friends and calmly stated, "Will is gonna lose his *shit*."

"I know! I can't wait," Mike laughed with them, their shoulders trembling and their eyes squinting beneath the weight of their smiles.

"So...how did you survive?" Dustin asked the girl as her smile slowly left her. The boys leaned in, eager to know the answer when all El could reply with was a shrug.

"You don't know?" Lucas asked. She shook her head, pursing her lips a second time. "How'd you get out of the Upside Down?" El shrugged, eyeing the floor meekly. All she could remember was spending hours, crouching in the mire, thinking desperately of Joyce and Mike and everyone she had ever come to love, then, out of nowhere, waking up inside of a tree. That single tree had acted as her home for the longest time...she'd been lucky to find the box. It had saved her life.

"What did you eat?" Dustin asked, that being his first thought whenever it came to survival.

"...eggos," El stated.

"Eggos?" Mike immediately chuckled at this odd coincidence as Lucas and Dustin grinned a bit confusingly.

"Where'd you get eggos?" Dustin giggled, setting his bike against Mike's garage wall.

"...the woods," El looked towards the trees as the boys followed her gaze. They stood against the perfectly blue sky, bunched together like

kids at a dance, whispering secrets along the gentle wind.

Lucas eyed Mike a little suspiciously, "...the woods?" El nodded in confirmation, and they got the feeling she was telling the truth. Still, it boggled their minds as they tried to picture random yellow boxes dotting the bushes and roots.

"...were they...warm?" Mike asked, simpering a little childishly.

"No," she shook her head, grimacing at the memories currently assaulting her subconscious. The rain...the trap...those horrible sounds in the night...they all came racing back to her and the boys saw her gaze deepen and distance simultaneously. Their smiles dropped a moment until Mike broke the silence.

"So...I was showing El a baseball earlier...do you guys have anything you wanna show her?" Mike asked, hoping to reconnect with her voracious learning side.

Dustin held up a finger, digging in his pockets to extract a quarter, holding it out for her to see. "This is money. A quarter dollar to be exact," he said, placing the metal disc into El's open palm. "We use it to buy things like food and clothes," he continued. She turned it over, studying the intricate designs on both sides. The face intrigued her as she marveled at the length of his silver hair, if the face was a he at all. "And, you can trade it for other types of money. Like, this-" he took the quarter from her, "-can be replaced with twenty-five of these!" A copper coin balanced itself between his fingers, standing much smaller than the silver one. El eyed it curiously as Dustin inhaled, preparing to continue. "Or you could-"

"She doesn't need to know about money!" Lucas rolled his eyes, brushing Dustin's hand down and out of her view. "Besides, **this** is way cooler than a stupid quarter," he unzipped his bag to reveal a coiled spring laying inside. The boy yanked it out and gave it to her as she struggled with it's expanding and contracting body. "It's called a slinky. Lemme show you something *awesome*," Lucas offered, taking the spring and rushing over to the stairs.

"Oh, you're gonna *love* this," Mike guaranteed as they all went to the bottom of the stairs. Lucas had climbed nearly to the top, positioning

the coiled wire and peering down at them below.

"You ready for this?" he asked. El nodded as the boys fidgeted about excitedly. With a brush of his hand, Lucas flipped one end of the slinky over itself and it began tumbling down the stairs. They all watched El's face open up with surprise as the slinky descended down Mike's stairs. Once it neared the bottom, El took a step behind Mike and clutched the back of his shirt protectively, half-expecting it to continue walking across the room and wander outside. Instead, it stopped on the landing, retracting into itself, suddenly rendered motionless. While the boys simply laughed at how she stared at the entertaining object, she was working through the physics in her mind, trying to figure it out.

"See? Cool, right?" Mike turned to grin at her as Lucas and Dustin snickered, replaying the slinky's periling journey down the steps, making little noises after each movement.

"...cool," she nodded, eventually smiling when Dustin knocked it over a third time.

"Here! Let's show her the TV!" Lucas suggested, his expression bursting with energy. El remembered watching it last time...and being immediately thrown into an all-consuming flashback.

"That sounds like a good idea! Imagine all the shows she hasn't seen yet!" Dustin enthused, his gaze flitting between the three children excitedly. He gasped, pointing and saying, "And all the movies!"

Mike watched El's expression neutralize and decided it was up to her. "What do you wanna do El?"

She thought about this for a moment, eventually breaking into a small smile. "Tic-Tac-Toe?" she asked. Mike grinned as Lucas and Dustin exchanged various questioning glances.

She ended up beating them all, one-by-one, each time they challenged her. "She *just* learned how to play, too," Mike boasted for her.

"WHAT?" Dustin threw his hands in the air as she drew a line through

three O's, winning the game a fifth time.

"That's *insane*..." Lucas shook his head. El eyed him, and he quickly added, "Like...in a good way though!"

"How are you *this* good at Tic-Tac-Toe?!" Dustin asked, giggling at her. A moment passed as the boys awaited some thought-out, methodical answer...and El just shrugged, pursing her lips as her eyes smiled at them. The boys chuckled, overjoyed that their old friend was back...Mike especially. He felt as if they'd simply picked up *right* where they'd left off, minus the harrowing situations. Just when Lucas had started up a sixth game, squinting his eyes determinedly at the girl, Mike's garage door swung open and Will rushed into the basement, stopping short to stare at the short-haired girl. His mind went about rekindling vague memories of her from last year.

"Will! This is Eleven! She came back!" Mike shot to his feet, reintroducing the girl he'd already met. "She's the one who found you in the Upside Down!" Dustin and Lucas stared excitedly as Will remained motionless, his eyes never leaving hers. El stood up, walking over to Will and watching him suspiciously. "...Will? You okay?"

He blinked as El now stood five feet before him, their eyes locked in some creepy, communicative staring contest. "...I remember you..." Will finally spoke, suddenly snapping from some kind of trance.

"Me too," El nodded, her eyes flitting to the floor. "I'm sorry..." Lucas scoffed at this as Dustin and Mike stared, entirely lost. *Why was this undeserved, misplaced guilt gushing from such a selfless girl?*

"...for what?" Will asked, his mind still swimming in some kind of haze. "You found me," he chuckled disbelievingly.

"...you fell, on Mirkwood," she pieced together different segments of his memory, igniting them with a match. Eleven shook her head, "I didn't see you..."

Suddenly, it all connected. Those few hours he'd missed were colored into his memory, though artificial and of Will's imagination. "...that was you?!"

"Yes," she nodded meekly.

"...you brought me home?" Will pressed, his eyes lighting up as a smile crept onto his face. She didn't know why he was smiling... she'd nearly *pulverized* him beneath the enormous plant.

"Yes..." El confirmed, her brow pinching in the center.

"Well...I guess that means, you kind of saved me twice!" he exclaimed, laughing full-bellied at his near-death experience. He extended a hand to her, and something in her memory *clicked*, causing other cogs and gears to fall into place. "Thank you! I...I *really* owe you one," he joked as she took his hand in hers, relieved that she'd finally memorized something she considered to be under the rather broad definition of "normalcy."

"Friends," El declared more than asked, smiling at him gratefully. She turned to smile at the rest of them, her eyes mostly settling on Mike.

"So...wait," Lucas broke the peaceful moment at the very sound of his voice. "...you saved Will...again?"

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: This is probably one of my favorite chapters...just saying. I actually like and feel confident about what I wrote, so I hope you guys like it too! Follow for more chapters and tell me what you think! Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*



## 21. Beautiful World

### Chapter Twenty-One – Beautiful World

"No...Jonathan-" Will rolled his eyes, his irritation playing out in a drawn out sigh.

"What? Do you *always* just walk into their house?" Jonathan asked, thinking it inappropriate.

"...well, sometimes," he didn't try to lie about it. Will didn't want Joyce to see him, fearing she'd *immediately* send him home.

"I'm just gonna go knock on the door," Jonathan stated. "I don't care which door you use, but I'm letting them know you're here," he sighed as Will rushed out of the car.

"Thanks Jonathan!" he shouted over his shoulder as his brother parked the car. *Why did he care so much? As if he were some unknown outsider to Mike's parents.* Will rolled his eyes knowingly, entering the basement through the garage door.

Jonathan pushed his hands into his pockets, taking his time as he stepped towards the Wheeler's house. His stomach wrenched nervously as he went over the endless responses he'd receive, the millions of excuses. Once Jonathan stood on the front porch, he raised his hand to knock but it froze midair, inches from the wooden frame. He'd already snuck into Nancy's room, *twice!* Why was this such an issue?! Jonathan shook his head, sighing deeply...then knocking determinedly on the oak, pursing his lips and immediately regretting his previous action. Just as he contemplated rushing back to his car and speeding off, *Nancy* stood in the door-frame, their eyes meeting, brown on blue. "Jonathan!" she said, her voice mixed with surprise and glee.

"Oh...hey!" he stammered, drawing a blank. "I uh...dropped Will off and he went into the basement. He's there now...and he says he's feeling better so..." Jonathan sighed, watching as her gaze deepened. "...I figured, t-time with his friends would be good for him."

"Yeah! No, you're right! That's fine..." Nancy agreed, though in a confusing manner. "Did you, wanna come in?"

"no! Well...I mean, I do. But I have to go to work soon..." he sighed, thoroughly dreading it.

"Oh, okay. I understand," she nodded, looking over her shoulder a moment. "...well, I guess I'll-"

"Nancy, I was actually wondering..." he began, his heart catching in his throat a little unexpectedly. Nancy watched him, those bright, blue eyes bearing down on his soft brown ones. He thought he might faint as he swallowed down his nerves, forcing himself to continue. "...I uh...I bought two tickets for *The Clash*...they're coming to Indiana this weekend and...I-I was wondering if you wanted to go see them perform," he stumbled through his words, his proposal having sounded way better in his head.

Nancy eyed him differently now, and at first it frightened him. This new look, one she'd never flashed his way until now...*surprised* him. It was vaguely reminiscent of...admiration...mixed with surprise and a pinch of self-conscious worries for good measure. "That...sounds, great! Yeah...I'd love to go," she nodded, her smile incredibly soothing. "I've actually never been to a concert," she simpered, peering up at him as if this was *very* uncool of her.

"Neither have I," he chuckled, grinning as they blocked out every other distraction, the rest of the world fading out into a blur of white and grey. Neither one noticed this, or would *ever* admit it to the other, and they even seemed to snap out of it simultaneously, their smiles dropping and their eyes widening a bit comically as if they'd been caught staring too long at a stranger.

"I'd have to ask my parents," she spoke, reminding him as much as she reminded herself.

"Y-Yeah! Of course!" Jonathan nodded understandably. "Just...make sure you tell them it's *The Clash* and not *Iron Maiden*," he joked, eyeing her reassuringly.

"Yeah...totally," she shook her head, trying to be discreet about

having never heard a song from either band. Still, the idea of going to a concert with Jonathan meant spending more time with him and getting to know him better. Last time they'd been attached at the proverbial hip, their beliefs had them at each other's throats...but it'd been their personalities that'd mended the bond. Still, these were dangerous waters. She'd just broken up with Steve and her thoughts hadn't yet settled...but this was Jonathan. Were it any other boy, she'd tell herself to watch out, but she knew she could trust him. And that certainly didn't mean she'd take him for granted. "Should I bring anything?"

"I-I can bring some cash in case we get hungry," Jonathan offered. "It might get cold so I would bring a hoodie, just in case..."

"Sounds good," she trailed off, unconsciously getting lost in his eyes. "-when is it?"

"-oh! It's Saturday," he replied after a moment's hesitation.

"Great! I'll ask my parents," she announced, smiling openly at him.

"Great..." he echoed, mirroring her expression in a comfortable way. They stood a moment more, basking in the glow of each other's soft gazes. "Well...I should go..." Jonathan grudgingly announced that he was running on a schedule.

"Yeah...wouldn't wanna be late," she agreed just as reluctantly.

"Yeah...they'd fire me in a heartbeat," he chortled, nodding and stepping off her porch. "I'll...see you around?"

"Yes! Definitely," she assured him, trying to hide her excitement out of politeness. They smiled and Nancy slowly watched as Jonathan got into his Ford, driving down the road and off to work. Something light and airy fluttered about in her chest whenever she imagined them at the concert, and it quickly became one of those addictive sensations. Her heart swelled and flickered like a candle in the wind, ignited at his very smile, sustained off his rambling words. There was something else too...she realized they had much in common when it came to familial roles. Both of them were eldest children, meant to protect and guide their younger siblings through the treacherous

obstacles of life. When it came to helping Mike, Nancy was *very* clumsy, prone to stumbling and falling, though she usually picked herself up when push came to shove...like it had last November. But Jonathan...Jonathan fulfilled this responsibility and more, gracefully and with care. It was hard not to smile with him whenever he watched Will, infinite admiration and happiness plastered across his face. She gazed at his car as it receded from view, inhaling at the realization that he was an inspiration for Nancy. He encouraged her to become a better sister...and he never had to say a word.

"Nancy?" Karen appeared behind her, shocking the girl from her thoughts.

"Mom!" Nancy gasped, shutting the door with a sigh. "You *scared* me..."

"Who was that?" her mother asked, eyeing her suspiciously.

Nancy returned her foreboding stare, "...Jonathan Byers."

"Oh," Karen sounded, seemingly surprised at this answer. "Well, what did he have to say?"

"He...invited me to a concert with him, on Thursday," Nancy said, her eyes trailing from the floor back to her mother.

Karen took a moment before she could express her surprise, "*Oh...*"

"Mom!" Nancy exclaimed, leering at her incredulously. "It's not like that! We're going as friends!"

"...alright..." Karen nodded in a knowing manner that endlessly irked her daughter. "...who's playing?"

"It's this band called, *The Clash*," Nancy said, hoping her mother knew as little about them as she did.

"Hmm..." Karen pursed her lips wondrously. "I'm not sure I've heard them before...your father and I will have to give them a listen..."

"Okay," Nancy nodded, beginning to return to the living room with Joyce and Ted. She'd been allowed to listen in on their words and

now knew practically *everything* about Eleven...about her mother and her involvement in MK Ultra; about how she could've grown up a normal girl named Jane. Uncertain chills coursed through her body many times during the discussion at the idea of a corrupt government, conducting horrible experiments on fellow human beings, just like her. Her parents were entirely swept away, disbelieving at first, but eventually realizing it all played out and the crossroads intersected perfectly.

"...is there, anything else we should know about?" Karen asked, her eyes swollen with shock.

"Yes..." Joyce quickly began to add. "Eleven needs to be kept a secret. Those men from the state are *still* out there, looking for her..." Ted and Karen exchanged alarming looks, seriously reconsidering their previously accepting attitudes. "...she's very close with your son... with *my* son, even. They're...they're her *only* friends..." Joyce shrugged hopelessly.

Mrs. Wheeler's gaze became distant as she struggled with the riskiness of it all. Ted spoke up, "And...she'd be staying with you?"

"Yes. I'm taking *full* responsibility for her," Joyce affirmed with a hasty nod and a slow swipe of her hand. The couple eyed each other, failing to communicate the way Hop and Joyce could.

"Will you, excuse us for a moment?" Karen asked, rising to follow her husband into the kitchen.

"Sure...sure," Joyce nodded as they exited the room. Nancy remained beside her on the couch, witnessing her worried expression deepen.

"...I think you're doing the right thing," Nancy tried to sound reassuring.

"What?" Joyce glanced up at her, deaf to the world moments ago. She'd been so preoccupied wondering where Hop had gone, bickering with her instinct over whether Eleven should stay.

"You're right...for bringing her here. She needs friends," Nancy explained herself. "...and, I *know* you'll be a good role model for her."

Joyce bashfully rolled her eyes at this, simply hoping she could figure out a way for them to get through Spring Break unscathed. "Thank you..." Joyce eventually said, smiling tiredly at her.

"You're welcome," she replied, frowning at the stress lines marking Joyce's face. She wanted desperately to help, but she didn't want to overstep the boundaries that border-lined insulting her. "If you ever need someone to watch her, I'd be happy to," she offered.

Joyce glanced up at her once again, pausing to ask, "Are you sure? I-I wouldn't be able to pay you..."

"That's fine! I wasn't expecting payment," she said, shaking her head reassuringly.

Joyce smiled at this bright young girl, "*Thank* you."

Nancy nodded, her gaze flitting to the archway as her parents returned, sitting down almost simultaneously. Joyce watched them, clasping her hands together whilst resting her arms on her thighs. "... Ted and I have been talking about it..." Karen began, her words trudging by with reluctance. "...we decided that she can come here, whenever she wants." Joyce sighed with relief. She had a minimum wage job, one that she couldn't afford to lose. Staying home to watch El could jeopardize her financial standings, and they'd be in debt up to their ears while they scraped by week-to-week. "We're here to help Joyce, however we can. But...we need to know more about the... *precautions*, we should take," Karen confided in her.

"Thank you...thank you so much!" Joyce breathed, shaking her head. "It's just...with the job, and Jonathan working..."

"We *completely* understand...don't we Ted?" Karen eyed him expectantly.

"o-oh yeah! Yes, of course!" he agreed as if being stirred from a daze. "She seems harmless enough...and I'm sure it'll be good for Mike too."

"Yes. He was...*heartbroken*, that night. There was nothing we could say to calm him down...you remember, right Nancy?" Karen watched her daughter nod solemnly.

"No but, *really*. I can't thank you guys enough..." Joyce went on to shower them with gratitude. "She's..." Joyce shook her head, her heart swelling as her words trembled and swayed. "...she's just a *kid*." The Wheelers' all nodded retrospectively, trying to revisit those tender years of childhood, their minds boggling whenever they factored in Eleven's situation.

"We'll take good care of her," Karen nodded, reaching over to lay a consoling hand on Joyce's knee.

"Thank you..." she said again, her eyes wearily noting the arms of the clock. She sighed, "I have to go to work soon...I won't be back until eight..."

"Well...maybe she could, stay here tonight?" Ted suggested out of nowhere. Karen and Joyce eyed him incredulously. "You deserve a night's rest," he said, noting how bent-out-of-shape Joyce knew she was. "I mean, this wouldn't be the first time, now would it?" Ted made an honest point, raising a humorous brow at his wife and daughter. "How long has he kept that tiny fort up?"

"Since last year..." Karen replied, shaking her head and sighing exasperatingly. It seemed easier for them when the wool was pulled over their eyes...

"You wouldn't mind it?" Joyce pressed a tentative question.

"...I suppose not," Karen eventually caved into agreeing.

"Thank you so *much* Karen..." she exhaled, standing to hug the woman. Mrs. Wheeler accepted the gesture welcomingly, patting the frazzled woman on the back. "Let me just ask her, before I go," Joyce said, gesturing to the basement.

"Of course," Karen nodded as Ms. Byers went, turning to face Nancy. Her daughter smiled, and something buried deep beneath all of Karen's doubt whispered a comforting reminder that things would be alright.

"Maybe she...made a new portal?" Lucas suggested as they sat around the table, their party now five bodies strong. Before Will could tell

who was coming down the stairs, his mother appeared, eyeing her son suspiciously.

"Will?!" she exclaimed as the boy shot to his feet.

"Jonathan said I could come! He drove me here! I feel fine!" Will blurted out as the boys all gritted their teeth.

For a moment, Joyce wanted to argue, to insist that he return home at once...but she saw how they'd been sitting, tight-knit in a circle of friends. Joyce gave in to Will's puppy-dog eyes with a sigh of averseness, knowing she could never stay mad at him for long. "...alright...you can stay."

Will's eyes broadened at this, "...really?! Thanks Mom!"

"Yeah yeah don't push it..." the woman hummed. Dustin and the boys snickered as they eyed Will jeeringly. Joyce stepped down, and this time Eleven stood to meet her, wary it was her turn to go. "I have to go to work until eight...do you think you'll be alright here?"

Eleven peered back at the boys, eyeing them all calmly. She turned back to face Joyce and replied, "Yes."

"Okay..." Joyce nodded, smiling down at her. She began to leave, pointing at them and squinting playfully, "*Behave* yourselves! And Will, don't let me hear that you ate too many sweets..."

The boy with the bowl cut rolled his eyes and called up the stairs, "I won't!" El returned to her friends as they waited for the adults to walk out of earshot. Lucas snickered, tapping Will playfully on the shoulder as the boy shoved his hands away, chuckling warmly. They heard the front door open, an exchange of farewells, and the closing of Mike's house.

"Do you think it could be that? You think maybe you...opened a new portal?" Mike asked, eyeing the girl intriguingly. She shrugged, maintaining their locked gaze as Mike sighed.

"...does she, know?" Will asked, gesturing to her.

"No. Not yet...I wanted to wait for all of us to be here," Mike replied



as Eleven watched them all suspiciously.

"Know...what?" she asked.

Mike began, hoping to explain the entire situation, "Will...is sick. But-

"-we think it may have something to do with the Upside Down," Lucas broke in.

"Speaking of that..." Dustin unzipped his backpack, extracting what looked like a lime popsicle. He placed it on the table between them as Will immediately recognized it, his eyes swelling at the cup. In the middle of the frozen cup lay the slug, suspended and motionless within the ice's grip. The ice itself had dyed a light green color, as if the slug had dissolved itself into the water.

"Whoa..." Lucas droned.

"I know! Isn't it crazy?" Dustin agreed as Will and Eleven stared at the ominous creature, locked away in its frigid prison.

"Have you ever seen anything like that?" Mike asked as El continued to watch it, as if it was going to suddenly burst into flames. They awaited an answer as El's gaze deepened, her mind suddenly reopening deep wounds. The slug reminded her of something small that rapidly amplified, distanced by trauma and locked away for sanity's sake. "...El?" The girl's breathing became labored as she lost herself in a nightmare, her subconscious finally cracking open, splitting itself into a million shards and allowing her to see into that lost memory.

*Each desk sat amok with moss and mold, the walls dripping green and black. There were no lights...the power was out. There would never be any light here...unless she found it herself. Something besides dried blood clogged her nostrils as the scent of carrion drifted lazily about the room. Flies hummed about a corpse before her, swarming with slugs and demented rats. Their beady red eyes regarded her cautiously as she lifted her head from the moistened floor. The most she could do was peer back forebodingly, blinking back her shell-shocked state. Their bare tails flicked about, bony and white, though caked with the sludge that coated nearly*

everything here. She sparingly breathed the toxic air, her mind pirouetting sickeningly as she peered about the room. An unwelcome chill assailed her and she shivered, her jacket moist and clinging to the side she'd collapsed onto. Hesitantly, she rose to her feet, the rats squeaking and retreating at her very presence. Her wide eyes took in the rotting corpse of the monster she'd conquered, it's flesh stripped nearly to the bones. The very image vibrated with maggots and tiny flying insects...and the longer she stared at the horrifying act of nature, the odder she felt, until something in her stomach finally lurched and she retched, vomiting it's meager contents onto the already soaked floor. It burned her throat and eyes as she grasped a desk, her palm squelching into a pile of webs and vegetation. Tears slipped down her cheeks and she exited the room, her voice shot from the bile. But she had to try...she wouldn't feel certain if she didn't.

"Mike?" Her voice was unimaginably frail as her sneakers squished with each step. It was the only sound that greeted her, echoing rancorously about the dilapidated halls. Filthy hands eventually found the door handles as she pushed against their metallic weight. A growth of some kind held them together at the seams, and she frantically pushed over and over, her breathing accelerating with frustration. She glared down at the tumor of an obstacle, crisscrossing in a web-like fashion. El bared her teeth, shrieking at the growth as it ripped in half, the doors flinging open like cardboard boxes. She stumbled through the opening as her fatigue gripped her like a plague. A moon hung green and slimy in the dark, and while the sky sat cloudless above her, no stars twinkled like they had at home. It was an infinite sheet of black, gazing down at her disdainfully and refusing to offer her anything besides a meager cast of light.

She couldn't keep track of how long she walked...the minutes stretched into hours and the hours leaked into days. The moon never moved, never grew brighter or dimmer...it was the only thing that seemed redundant here. The beasts never stayed the same; some flew about without any wings, yelling incomprehensibly in human-like voices; other invertebrates fought for life as they writhed helplessly on the ground, drowning in the polluted mire. And Eleven walked among them, moving like the dead and breathing like the invalid.

Bouts of dizziness occasionally grabbed both sides of her head, stopping her in her tracks. Even when she wasn't moving, the world spun on its axes like a toy as she fought to gain her bearings, digging her heels into

the mud and gritting her teeth against it all. Finally, when she thought she'd seen it all and resigned herself to defeat...there was the tree. It looked like any other old tree, draped over with wispy vines and great fungal masses. She leaned against its bark, exhausted and hopeless, the sounds of something in the distance no longer pushing her with fear. Her poisoned lungs cobwebbed over with particles dwindling in the open air as her eyes slowly closed, and her hand – which was pressed against the bark with all of her weight – became her last sturdy anchor. Her thoughts turned to home, to Mike and Joyce when she heard those footsteps in the distance. The ground trembled at their very impact and she blinked at the sounds, still fighting for breath. She could see it's form peeking through the trees, looming and wiry with tentacles. Most of it was indistinguishable, casted in shadow and darkness. It breathed in a humming growl and El suddenly felt her pulse quicken as it approached her, rapidly collecting that she was in mortal danger. Her thoughts desperately rewound themselves, clinging hopelessly to the things she loved most...those she fought for and against. It was hard to focus...she seemed to have switched sides somewhere along the way...

"...Papa?"

The footsteps stopped, it's breathing now dangerously close. Suddenly, El's hand sunk into the bark of the tree, squelching as she unknowingly pushed through its timbers. Her eyes widened at this and she sank to her heels, breaking more of the wood open with much difficulty; her hands were cut and swollen, threatening to spill over with blood. That was when the beast hissed like some kind of serpent, a violent rattle finding her amidst the morass. El trembled as she clambered into the crawlspace just inside the plant. She'd simply meant to hide there...to die there; she wasn't stupid, understanding the fact that if nothing changed, it would happen soon, and she would fade away just as quickly as she'd been brought into this world. The girl hadn't eaten in days, and the last thing she wanted was for anyone to find her...like she'd found the Demogorgon. Or like how she'd found Barb...tears stung her eyes as she cringed with sadness. Oddly enough, the inside of the tree seemed to stretch on **much** further than it should have, so, with nowhere else to go and nothing left to do, she continued crawling through the tunnel, webs clinging to her hair and jacket.

Her hands and knees squelched less and less the further she went and

eventually...her palm pressed itself into cold, solid ground. It was weird... perhaps this was a new part of the Upside Down she'd never visited? If so...shouldn't she turn back? As she battled herself over this, a beam of light poured through a break in the wood, brighter than anything she'd seen for a **very** long time. El blinked astoundingly at this, her finger finding the hole and pushing against the wood, testing its strength. It bent beneath her already sapped energy, and using the last of her stores, she **slammed** her full shoulder into its rigidity, busting through and collapsing into a pile of snow, perfectly white and cold.

As she slowly dragged herself from the pillows, blinking in confusion as parts of it flecked on her nose and eyelids, a warm glow reached down to touch her. It was the most beautiful thing she'd **ever** seen...trillions of stars were thrown onto the snow, twinkling at her in the glaring sunlight. The trees were stripped bare, hefting the white stuff onto their shoulders instead of trailing hundreds of leaves by their fingertips. The air...the air itself was clean and crisp; you could taste the winter on your tongue. Her ears shaded red as the cold finally got to her and she leaned back against the tree, watching cautiously as the inside of the hollow began to close itself.

Where was she? Was this...could it be? She was doubtful, gazing dreamily at the lonely clouds drifting about the sky. That was when her breath caught in her throat, her eyes locking on something glaring at her from the treetops. Its eyes were wide and yellow, its body feathered white and peppered black. When it blinked, she inhaled deeply, half-expecting it to rush down and attack her...but it only continued to watch her, equally as curious as the thing it observed. Eventually its head swiveled away, satisfied with her silence and stretching its enormous wings into the air. It lofted itself into the open space, catching a headwind and expertly flying off, practically melting into the snow-covered horizon. She lost its body in the white, sighing to herself and going over her cuts and bruises. They would take time to heal...but she imagined it was over. Perhaps she really was back...the creatures here were intriguing and beautiful and acted with purpose. If this were the Upside Down, the white bird would've surely ended her for making eye contact. As she dragged herself back inside the hollow, reaching a tentative hand down to cup a ball of snow, she began to fight a brand new kind of war...one that only she could feel. To her great satisfaction, snow turned out to be edible, and it would act as her lifeline for many days afterwards as she slowly rebuilt her strength. With

*the snow as her source of water, she'd ultimately find the box, memorizing its path through the trees using various landmarks. Before the snow melted, it was a single crooked tree that told her she was heading in the right direction. Once the white was leached into the cold, hard earth, a mossy rock became her second guide.*

*And she never forgot them – her old friends – through all of this surviving. As they celebrated Christmas, New Year's, and Valentine's Day without her, they were **all** she thought about.*

"El? EL!" She blinked, breathing deeply at the feel of his hand gripping her shoulder.

"Eleven!" Dustin exclaimed, waving a cautious hand in front of her. When her eyes met his, he smiled and spoke in a loud voice. "Hey! Hey how many fingers am I holding up?" She creased her brow at this as she tried counting them. "How many fingers?!"

"Dustin knock it off!" Lucas scoffed as he watched her eyes travel from one digit to the next.

"...five..." she mumbled, her gaze returning to the slug in the center of the room.

"Oh...oh okay..." Dustin sighed, obviously very relieved. She pondered to herself, *no...it hadn't been on the Demogorgon's corpse...it's body was too dark for that.* She was certain of one thing only...it needed to be destroyed. El turned towards the cup and locked her gaze as if taking aim with a high-powered rifle, and the boys all moved back a bit as her glare intensified. Her brown eyes bore holes into the cup as she took a second more to decide just how she wanted to vanquish the tiny horror.

Mike hands broke her focus as he shook her frame, "EL! What are you doing?"

She eyed him confusingly, "Killing it."

"Mike, just let her do her thing," Lucas shrugged. "We won't have to burn it now and-"

"No! Remember when you did that to the Demogorgon?!" he shouted

above the others. Her eyes closed regretfully, suddenly realizing his fears. "You were *gone*! What if that happened again!?"

"Mike..." she began; doubtful it would occur with something so small and helpless.

"NO! I won't let you!" he proclaimed, grabbing the cup and rising to his feet. He pushed through the door as his friends followed.

"Mike!" Dustin exclaimed as he spun him around to face them. He was clutching the cup to his chest, not allowing them to take it from him, though they weren't about to try. "What are you doing?"

"If the weirdo doesn't think it'll happen, then it probably won't!" Lucas exclaimed, eyeing the girl questioningly. His words were laced with stress, "Do *you* think it'll happen again?" Lucas wasn't angry at her, just irritated at Mike's overbearingly protective attitude.

She lowered her gaze, her brow pinching worriedly in the center as she answered honestly, "...I don't know..." Lucas sighed hopelessly as Dustin pursed his lips.

"Let's just burn it..." Will suggested. They all glanced over at him as he continued, "...that way it'll be gone for good and we can forget about them."

"Yeah, until you hack up another one," Lucas added in a pessimistic tone. Will shot him a look as Lucas raised his hands in defense. "Look, all I'm saying is, how are we even gonna burn it without Mike's parents noticing? Even if we go outside, they could still smell the smoke."

"Yeah, what if they called the fire department? We'd have to hide El all over again!" Dustin broke in. Their opinions were divided, Will and Mike determined to burn it while Lucas and Dustin argued the points of logic.

"Well then we'd have to go somewhere no one will see us," Mike declared. They all eyed Will expectantly as he returned a stern gaze.

"...if we go to Castle Byers, we're *going* to burn it. That's final," he laid down the ground rules like a game plan.

"We'll need a lighter..." Dustin said, wandering about Mike's garage. "...maybe some oil too...just for good measure..." He bent down to pick up an old-fashioned oil can, shaking it and listening to the liquid splash about inside.

"We can use my Dad's old lighter, I think it's in that box over there..." Mike pointed to a box full of camping supplies. Dustin promptly began sorting through it. For some reason, the thought of burning the slug suddenly caused Mike's stomach to lurch uncomfortably. But this was the same atrocity that had been living *inside* his best friend's gut, and simply knowing that curbed his hesitation. Lucas hadn't moved from his spot, thoroughly irritated.

"I think we should do it," Will announced. "But...there's one problem..."

Lucas rolled his eyes, "Worried your mom is gonna see us?"

Will eyed him, chuckling a little defensively, "No! She and Jonathan are at work. I just, didn't bring my bike with me."

"That's okay. Lucas or Dustin can give you a ride," Mike offered. The two boys exchanged looks as Lucas rolled his eyes. He seemed more than hesitant, with El bearing the most trepidation of them all.

"If we get in trouble...I'm *blaming* you," he muttered, squinting at Will in defeat.

"I'm totally okay with that," he acknowledged, following them onto Mike's driveway. They all got on their bikes as Mike turned to El.

"You ready to go?" he asked, noticing her turn back towards the door hesitantly. "Don't worry, we'll be there and back before anyone even notices." Reluctantly, she nodded, climbing onto the back of Mike's seat and gripping the sides of his coat. Turning forwards and pedaling, he smiled, knowing she was so close and safe with them. Will ended up riding with Lucas since Dustin's backpack was so large and heavy, carrying the frozen eyesore inside. The three bikes rode in a V-formation, and Eleven gazed about at their tiny little town so astounded and awe-stricken. Mike could feel her grip tighten or relax whenever civilians eyed their bikes yearningly, wishing they could

return to that golden age of youth. Lucas slowed at an intersection, and the rest braked to stop beside him, a single car on the other side. For some odd reason, there was a steady stream of cars crossing their path, and so they waited, (for once) abiding by the laws of traffic. The one car in particular – the one facing them across the street – hummed loudly with incessant banter.

"But MOM! Everyone's going! Even James is gonna be there!"

"Troy, I don't *care* if James is going. Those boys he hangs around with are all trouble, and I *don't* want their influence to rub off on you!" Troy's mother fiercely scolded him as she gripped the steering wheel tighter. "If James jumped off a cliff, would you?"

"Oh Mom..." he groaned, rubbing his forehead. "...but-!"

"-AH! My decision is final. You're **not** going!" she declared sternly. Huffing in irritation, he pressed his face against the window, his seething breaths fogging the glass. Once the traffic slowed down, three bikes approached them and he immediately recognized the riders...Toothless, Sinclair and Frogface. The scrawny Byers' kid was with them...as well as another. He squinted to get a better look at the one with the short hair and internally gasped, his eyes locking with her cold, dark orbs. It took about a minute, but the instant she recognized *him*, she didn't hesitate to glare him down, squeezing Wheeler's jacket angrily.

"MOM! MOM LOOK!" he pointed at the girl through the window as the bikers rolled past them.

"Troy! I'm trying to drive! Don't distract me!" his mother bit back, her words heavy with annoyance.

"NO MOM REALLY! It's the..." the girl he was referring to maintained her glare as if it was her destiny, even turning back to watch as they wheeled down the road. Troy flipped around in his seat, eyeing her alarmingly through the rear-view window as they slowly shrunk out of sight. While he quaked with fear knowing she was back, he ground his teeth together when he recalled the look of content on Wheeler's face. As his mother turned onto their home street, Troy resettled so he was facing front, rubbing his arm bitterly.



"Hey El..." Mike said through steady breaths.

"What?" her voice was muffled in his ear...and she sounded, *angry*.

"...you're squeezing my sides," his face cringed as her grip immediately lessened.

"Oh...sorry..." she apologized, her tone returning to its amiable soft-spoken soprano.

"That's okay..." he breathed, pedaling on towards Castle Byers.

"...did anyone else see Troy in that car back there?" Will shouted above the wind.

"I didn't," Lucas shrugged, glancing behind him and past Will's hair.

"Me neither," Dustin panted. Mike winced in pain. El was gripping his sides again, seething into his shoulder.

"El..." he began, the pain instantly leaving him.

"Sorry..." she mumbled, swallowing her anger a little abashedly.

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: First off, I'd like to thank anyone who has read THIS far into the story. I really do appreciate your time and reviews. It means a lot for me to receive feedback and constructive criticism. Plus, I'm writing this for you guys! So I REALLY hope you enjoyed this! Follow for more chapters and tell me what you think! Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*

## 22. Lions

### Chapter Twenty-Two – Lions

"What the hell is this guy doing?!" Powell shouted to his partner as their tires worked against the roadway.

"I don't know!" he barked back, white-knuckling the wheel and gritting his teeth. "It was supposed to be a normal traffic stop, and the next thing you know he just *takes* off!"

Powell gripped a radio to his cheek, "Any officers in the area, we're gonna need backup. We've got a runner..." He squinted his eyes at the car in front of them, momentarily lifting his finger from the pager. "You get the license plate?"

"Oh yeah! I've only been staring at it for the last *five minutes*..." Cal addressed, his voice laced with anxiety.

"Good...now just, *keep* your eye on the road and see if you can get closer. We gotta stop this guy before he hurts someone," Powell seamlessly took the initiative, acting as the senior officer. Callahan let his foot sink into the pedal, his engine growling disagreeably. "Closer..." Powell urged, unholstering his gun and lowering a window. The younger deputy eyed him alarmingly.

"...w-what are you doing?!" Cal exclaimed, instinctively taking his foot off the gas. A considerable space instantly separated the two cars.

"CAL focus on the *road*! We gotta stop this guy!"

"But...*Christ* you're gonna *shoot him*?!" his voice pitched a little incredulously.

"*Hell* no! I'm aiming for the tires, now *get closer*!" Powell growled. With his confusion mitigated, Callahan reluctantly pressed his toe into the gas pedal, and the chase zipped by the local pharmacy. Sirens blared across town as Jonathan stocked shelves. The two cars were mere background noise as he kept his head down, trying to

avoid his coworker, Eric. For some odd reason, they'd been disagreeing more and more recently. Jonathan now found no reason to speak to him anymore...not unless there was an absolute *need* for it.

"Jonathan?" The teenager peered over his shoulder at the pharmacist. He beckoned him over with a finger and Jonathan's breakfast turned to sludge, walking over and returning his basket of items to the niche behind the counter. "Let's talk for a moment," he insisted.

"Sure," Jonathan nodded, following his boss into the back room. They came to a stop once they were nearly by the back door, and the further they receded from his coworkers' earshot, the more unsettled Jonathan grew. He hoped he was being at least a little discreet about it...

"So Jonathan...how is everything going with you?"

It was an unexpectedly loaded question...he'd just asked the girl of his dreams to attend a concert with him (and not just any concert, a showing of *The Clash*) and she'd said *yes*. So, in that aspect, he was drifting contentedly on cloud nine, entirely untethered to his many worries. And then he'd remember his overworked mother, battling with herself over the simplest of decisions and hiding a child from government officials...oh, *and* his brother was deathly ill. "Things are...fine," he lied, hoping to skirt any more questions of this type. "...how are things going with you?"

Normally, Jonathan wouldn't ask, simply because he didn't care. But this was Joe, his boss and long-time owner of the pharmacy. He knew nearly *every* regular customer – including his mother – and always took some time from his never-ending workload to greet them by name as they stepped through the entrance. Joe was also *very* intelligent, extremely apt at answering questions concerning medications or when to apply certain creams or take pregnancy tests...he was an expert in his field, and for that Jonathan respected him. Plus, he seemed to be a generally good man, helping Jonathan along with his training and thoroughly outlining his job expectations. He lifted a hand to rub his balding head, the hair crowning his scalp white with age, though his skin held young and tan. His dark eyes twinkled and he sighed a little drolly, "Let's see...how are things

going with me...?" Jonathan awaited a reply when Joe glanced up and smiled absently, "...I don't really know." That was another thing he liked about Joe; he didn't buckle under pressure. Rather, he used his frank sense of humor to *transcend* his stress and fatigue, uplifting himself and those around him to help push through the day. Joe *never* complained, not even when a customer was being rude; he simply understood that medicine was something to get distraught over...*especially* if the prescriptions weren't filled on time.

"Tell me about it," Jonathan chuckled, both men laughing amiably between the shelves.

"Well, it's good to hear that everything's going well at home..." Joe nodded comfortably. "...how's Will doing?" It was no secret; you couldn't really hide the fact that someone in your family was sick from a pharmacist that filled their script orders.

"Oh, he's great. He's still recovering...but, the doctors couldn't find out what was wrong with him...so he got to come home," he explained as Joe nodded, carefully following his words. "...that's probably the only good thing to come out of it," Jonathan added a little bitterly, silently taking into account how intently Joe listened whenever he spoke.

He nodded knowingly, "I see...well, we can only hope for the best." Jonathan mimicked his action, pursing his lips nervously. Joe quickly changed subjects, not wanting to upset him. "There's something that was brought to my attention a few days ago. Now...you close one of the registers at the end of your shift, correct?"

"Yeah...I count the profit and leave forty dollars inside for the next person," Jonathan rehearsed this memorized information.

"Right, well...you've been off ten bucks almost every night..." Joe informed him, gritting his teeth much to Jonathan's horror. *Ten dollars?!* It couldn't be...Jonathan double-counted the money *whenever* he closed, and his discrepancies had only amounted to a few pennies. But, *ten dollars?!*

"Oh...I have?" he found himself echoing in a shocked tone. Joe nodded sternly, pursing his lips hesitantly. He had to be careful about

how he phrased this...

"Yes...and, I'm sorry to say this in the middle of your shift, but...we can't afford to keep losing money like that," the man stated, peering up at the slightly taller boy. "I don't wanna have to do this, but it's company policy and...I'm gonna have to let you go for a while."

His heart sunk, "Joe...if this is about stealing, I'm *not* your guy."

"I know Jonathan...I don't think it's you...my *boss* does," Joe assured him. "I'm sorry...but the other people here are in...sturdier positions and we can't afford to lose anyone else." He spoke in a half-hearted manner, as if he wasn't truly believing his own words. This thoroughly confused Jonathan, who'd been real with Joe since they'd met.

"But I can learn..." Jonathan said. "I would *never* steal from this place."

Joe's face suddenly registered a look of hidden sympathy; he truly felt sorry for the boy. Then – to Jonathan's great confusion – he peeked over his shoulder, motioning Jonathan to follow with a finger so they could stand outside. The youngest wedged the door open using a communal piece of wood so they wouldn't be locked out. Joe's voice dropped in volume as he stood closer to Jonathan, "I *know* it isn't you."

"Oh..." he was a bit perturbed by this secrecy. "...do you, *know* who it is?" Jonathan asked out of curiosity.

Joe nodded deliberately, mouthing the name, "Eric." Jonathan's face registered every bit of contempt he'd harbored for that spiteful snake of a man, shaking his head frustratingly. "My boss can't see that it's him because they have an...*affair*, going on," Joe said with a barely subdued shudder. "He joined us *long* before you were even born, so he's simply more experienced...and Debbie knows him better..." Jonathan took a moment to eye the ground, expecting Joe to deliver his quipped version of a send-off any second now. "...but I would rather have an honestly inexperienced worker on my team than a skilled thief." His brown eyes flitted back up to Joe's as the pharmacist placed a firm hand on his shoulder. "I'm not firing you. I

don't want to. I mean, you're the *only one* who does the garbage correctly," he chuckled, complimenting Jonathan on his cleanliness. Joe knew he was a good worker, and he didn't want to lose him over a petty misunderstanding. A hint of laughter rumbled in Jonathan's throat, though his heart pattered about nervously. "I'm going to bring Debbie here, maybe have her *catch* Eric in the act. *Then*, hopefully she'll know who to fire." Joe paused, hesitant to be the bearer of bad news, "Unfortunately, your hours are going to be cut."

"I understand," Jonathan nodded, removing his vest button-by-button.

"I hate to do this to you..." Joe shook his head. "The whole thing is an awful waste of time and resources...but I *tried* mentioning that it could be Eric. She just wouldn't hear me."

"No...it's fine! Thank you," he shook off Joe's sympathy. Jonathan understood he was actually taking a big risk, all for the truth. Pharmacists were valued individuals procured through years of practice and dedication...but they were – like so many good things steadily became – ultimately replaceable. Reluctantly, Jonathan handed him his vest as Joe unclipped his name-tag from the cloth, knowingly slipping it into his pocket. "Should I go now, or...?"

"I'm afraid so," Joe affirmed in an empathetic tone. Jonathan acknowledged this with a nod, his face stern and expressionless. "Hey," the pharmacist reached a hand out to grip his shoulder a second time. "You'll be back. This isn't some sympathy ploy...it's *actually* happening and needs to stop. I have your phone number... we'll talk as soon as Eric is gone. And if for some crazy reason Deb doesn't fire him, I will *personally* hang up my coat and never work here again." Jonathan's heart jumped at this, taken aback by his boldness. "I mean, they can't run a pharmacy without the pharmacist, right?" he chuckled, raising his brow and shoulders.

In that moment, the boy stood witness to all of the good qualities Joe looked for in a worker shining through in his own words. "I...I don't know what to say," Jonathan stammered, offering his hand gratefully. Joe clasped it in his own, shaking it resolutely.

"I'll make sure you get paid for today as well," Joe reassured him. "Plus...if you ever need any medicine for your family, I'll sneak in the

employee discount."

"...t-thank you," Jonathan stammered, releasing his hand. Now he had someone else to look up to...a man of his word – he hoped – and an expert at his practice.

"...good luck Jonathan," Joe finally smiled at him, his dark eyes tired yet youthful and bursting with energy. "We *will* see you again," he added with an affirmative nod.

"Have a good one Joe," Jonathan concurred, beginning to walk off towards his car. Something poked at the back of the pharmacist's brain as he watched the boy, and he hastily began following him.

"-oh! Hold up a second!" Joe raised a hand, bringing something out of his white coat pocket and holding it out to Jonathan. "Here...it's a card for another place of employment. Joyce told me about how much you like photography. This is a studio that shoots pictures for the schools in the area, for graduation and other ceremonies..."

"Oh...wow," the teenager mused, studying the tiny rectangular business card as if it were already a lovely photo. For a moment, he was simply astounded into silence, smothered in his own appreciation. "Thank you..."

"You're welcome," Joe nodded. "I've gotta get back..."

"-yeah!" Jonathan agreed as Joe picked up the board, about to close the door behind him. Never before had he felt this haplessly lucky. "Joe!"

"Yeah?" he peeked through the space between the building and the door.

"Really...thank you...so much," Jonathan pressed, unable to express his gratitude any other way. Jonathan didn't have to go into details... Joe had known Joyce since she'd moved here and completely understood the boys' situation. Well...minus the weird girl anyway.

The man smiled knowingly, leisurely closing his eyes. "I'll be seeing you soon Jonathan," he assured, shutting the door and returning to the endless stream of amber bottles and chalky pills. An odd sense of

comfort welled within him as he glared at the cowlick adorning the back of Eric's head, hoping he'd be able put his plan into action soon enough. He'd have to, before they went bankrupt anyway...

Jonathan stood, his hands in his pockets for a moment, bringing the note back up to gaze at the black font contentedly. He figured he shouldn't get his hopes up...things could still go wrong; it seemed to be a trend for him. But for once, he felt that while his life was falling apart – as per the usual – he had finally obtained a safety net, promising to glue the pieces that fell back together, all in due time. Jonathan breathed a deep sigh, shutting his car door and clipping the tiny card to his sun visor. He knew there was a very real chance Joyce's reaction would be volatile when she heard the news...but this was coming from Joe, a trusted family friend. Hopefully, she'd be able to see past the money and have faith in the pharmacist's words... Jonathan just hoped he could retell the story correctly.

Every bump shook her bones as their tires trembled against the forest floor. Beams of light cascaded through spots of blue, glistening against their spokes and wheels blindingly. Castle Byers sat mere yards before them, and they reached it easily...well, Dustin was panting, but for the most part, all was well. "Oh my god..." he groaned, stumbling off his bike and leaning with his hands pressed into his knees. He gasped a little laughably, trying to catch his breath, "...okay, we're here..."

El smiled as Mike stood beside the bicycle, holding it steady while she climbed off it. Lucas watched them through squinted eyes as Will toppled to the ground, having no steady hand to hold their bike while he dismounted. The boy rose to his feet, collecting himself with a little shake while Dustin dug through his bag. Then, he appeared beside Eleven, making a grand gesture with an outstretched arm, "Welcome to Castle Byers!" Eleven went over the wooden fort with her eyes, noticing the American flag sticking proudly from the top. It's red and white stripes billowed softly in the wind, though her favorite part to look at were the blue embroidered stars. Three signs sat, their messages painted vibrant yellows and reds. *All friends welcome. Home of Will the Wise. Castle Byers.* They all grinned at Will's creativity, even El, and the boy playfully bowed once, then twice. "You can look inside if you want," he offered, opening the door with a



sweep of the blanket. Smiling, El crept inside, the boys trailing close behind her. Colored pictures hung almost everywhere, and she'd take a moment to approach each one, studying it closely. She'd been here before – albeit in another, much *darker* dimension – but she'd never taken the time to actually appreciate his artwork. "That's us fighting the Displacer Beast," Will pointed them out to her as she gazed fondly at each one. A single picture hung salient amidst the brown, wooden walls, it's wax-colored drawings seemingly brighter than the rest. "Oh! That's us fighting the Demogorgon! Look, that's you right there!" his finger pressed against a small figure, her white shoes planted firmly whilst clenching her fists beneath a blue jacket. Will simpered a bit bashfully. "They described you the best they could...but, I mean, at least I got the hair right!" he mused as she stared adoringly at the portrayal. Her smaller-self appeared *furious*, her head down-turned as she raised an arm in defense.

"That was so bad-ass how you killed it!" Lucas burst out. He giggled, mimicking Eleven's stare and throwing an arm out before himself jokingly. Dustin and Will chuckled helplessly as El smiled at him.

"Don't worry, it's *much* scarier when you do it," Mike rolled his eyes in a teasing manner as Lucas shot him a look. "I can't *wait* until summer," Mike sighed, rubbing his chilled shoulders. Before El could turn to ask, he began, "Summer is when it's warmest here..."

"-and there's never any snow!" Dustin added as El pondered the new word. "...you know, snow?"

"...snow?"

"Yeah. Frozen rain. It's white and cold and fluffy," Lucas described the familiar texture.

"And you can eat it!" Will pointed excitedly. "Although, it doesn't really taste very good..." She was beginning to remember something like that...

"-but El! **NEVER** eat yellow snow," Mike warned, his eyes broadening alarmingly as he splayed his fingers before her.

"Ugh..." Dustin groaned.

"Oh yeah, *never*," Lucas chimed in with a frown.

"...w-why not?" she asked, her face opening up in shock.

They all turned to Mike, grinning at him as he sighed hopelessly. "Because...it's...probably...pee," he stammered. She grimaced, her animated expression saying it all. "I know...it's gross..."

"Yeah. Don't do it," Lucas reaffirmed. The girl nodded along with the rest of them, returning to gaze wonderingly about Will's fort. "So... are we actually gonna burn that thing or play show-and-tell for the rest of the day?"

"In a second!" Mike barked back in a hushed whisper as El stood before something, her lips parting in a stunned silence.

"Mike, there's *plenty* of things we can show her at your place. Let's just get this over with..." Lucas sighed, huffing in irritation.

Mike sighed just as aversely, peering over to Dustin. "Do you have it?"

"Yep," his lips pursed as he extracted the frozen cup. Its sides were sweating as it melted between his fingers. "We better hurry..." Dustin noted.

"El, we're gonna burn the slug now..." Mike informed her as the rest of them went about setting up a spot. Lucas and Dustin placed the cup in a clearing outside Will's fort. The wizard held the lighter in his hand as it glistened in the sunlight, and when peered into it just right, he could stare back at himself, reflected within its metal surfaces. He glowered at the image, replaying Lucas' words over in his head. *Yeah...until you hack up another one...* an unsettling remorse eroded his confidence as his friends eyed him confusingly.

"Will!" Lucas shouted and the boy flinched, the lighter slipping from his fingers and pitching sideways into the soil. "Are you ready?"

"...yeah. Totally..." he stammered, bending down to retrieve the metal. "Where's Mike?" he asked the two boys. Lucas rolled his eyes, nodding at the fort as the boy in the hat shrugged.

"El...what's wrong?" Mike asked, refusing to leave her face wrought with sadness. She blinked, sharply catching her breath as her eyes locked onto something painfully reminiscent. He followed her gaze, his eyes eventually landing on a stuffed lion seated in the far corner. It's plastic eyes and amber mane were bright with artificial life and Mike looked back to Eleven, watching as her mind careened helplessly into another oppressive flashback.

*"Eleven...Eleven are you awake?" his voice stirred her from a dream and she shifted, eyeing him groggily. Dragging herself from the mattress, she sat up, facing him and rubbing an eye with the ball of her fist.*

*"Yes Papa..."*

*"I've brought you something today," he said in a friendly tenor. Sure, she could see his arm tucked behind his back, undoubtedly carrying something secret. A spark of excitement ignited within her as she shifted, her limbs cold beneath the gown. Smiling, he brought the object around in front of him. It's glossy orange mane was the first thing to strike her, wispy yet firm at the same time.*

*"What is it?" she asked as the man sat beside her on the bed. He held out the toy to her and she touched it, grateful to find its synthetic mane was just as soft as it appeared.*

*"This is called a lion," he spoke, his smile never leaving him. "His name is Leo and he's going to stay with you while you sleep."*

*She looked up at him, a little confused at this. No one had **ever** offered to sleep in the same room as her, for as long as she could remember. Why would Leo want to? They'd just met! "...why Papa?"*

*"Lions are strong and brave...like you," he smiled, touching her shoulder affectionately. "If you keep him close by your side, he will keep your bad dreams away." A seven-year-old girl peered down into the emotionless face of the feline as it maintained its relaxed position despite the pull of gravity. His eyes were golden and he hadn't blinked since he'd been brought in here...so maybe he didn't need to sleep like she did. Perhaps he really could keep the night terrors away...*

*A smile worked its way across El's face and she hugged the lion close,*

"Thank you Papa." It was the best thing he'd ever gifted her.

*Dr. Brenner smiled, getting lost in this stolen role he'd acquired from someone else's child. There were times he truly felt responsible for her safety and wellbeing, but he was certain their tests would **never** leave facility grounds. She would grow up here and she would die here, having fulfilled her purpose...once she became strong enough. Right now, the most impressive thing she could do was slide a small object across a table. He felt that she could do so much more, if the doctors weren't so perturbed by a petty nosebleed. Brenner made a note to himself to start testing more things with her, confident she could handle them, even now. She continued cradling the stuffed toy in her arms, letting the lion's body slip between the crook of her jaw and shoulder. "Sleep well, Eleven," he was by the exit, flicking the lights off and slowly shutting the door. The girl watched him go, looked into Leo's face one more time, then tried to resettle herself on the bed, intent on falling back asleep. She'd been right too; when she woke, Leo still lay in the exact same position, his eyes alert and diligent. He hadn't moved all night, and Brenner had been right as well...she hadn't had any dreams – good or bad – that night.*

Slowly...then all at once, El reopened her eyes to the present, gazing into the face of someone else's guardian as he lay protectively awake and attentive, his fur a tad brighter than Leo's and his posture a bit different. She could feel Mike's gaze on her, soft and patient, yet bustling with unanswered questions. "...El?" he finally spoke.

"Yes?"

"...is everything okay?" he asked, his dark, luminous eyes concerned and searching hers. He could see the beginnings of sorrow lingering beneath the surface, moist and clear. But with every second she met his stare, that bubbling grief seemed to alleviate itself, being substituted for another emotion that made Mike's stomach flutter in an entirely changed manner.

"Yes," she nodded, pursing her lips in the tiniest of smiles.

"Okay," he said, his eyes flitting to the ground thankfully.

"Guys!" Will opened the tent flap, his smile lessening when he saw them facing each other, mere feet away. "Uh...we're gonna burn it

now, so..."

"Right!" Mike blurted out with a raise of his finger. He walked from the fort, closely trailed by the girl who took a single moment to look back at Will's stuffed lion, her memories confusingly bitter. Will followed her gaze – he was still holding the flap open – and simpered shyly.

"Oh...that's my lion..." he scratched the back of his head. "I keep him out here because...I figured he enjoys it more than being cooped up inside all the time..."

"What's his name?" she asked out of the blue.

"Oh...his, name?" Will repeated, as if this were an odd question to ask. She nodded as Will pursed his lips, his cheeks turning red. "... Oliver..."

She smiled openly at him as he chuckled at the silly childhood souvenir. "Does he work? Out here?" Eleven was referring to the distance his house sat from his fort, wondering if Oliver could reach him if need be.

"...what?" Will asked, confusion gracing his smile.

"Guys! Come on! We don't have all day!" Lucas barked, snapping them from their focus.

"Here...let's finish this thing..." Will sighed, gesturing for her to follow. She did, standing beside Mike as they both gazed down at the tiny pit Lucas had dug. Dustin's hands were black with dirt as he dropped the last of tinder down into the depression. He doused the cup in a meager spattering of oil, shaking the can over and over until it went dry.

The boy sighed and flung it to the side, "Well, that's finished..." It clanked about the roots and leaves.

Lucas held the lighter before him, flicking it open and flicking his fingers across a latch. A bright orange spark burst into life, dancing about in the crisp, spring air. Eleven's eyes snapped wide at this; it was the first time she'd seen *fire* in any shape or form...and it was

endlessly intriguing. Rather than light it himself, Lucas held it out to Will as the boy eyed him alarmingly. "Do you want to?" Lucas asked.

The boy pursed his lips, his brow suddenly creased in the middle. Whenever they took a moment to think about what they were doing, it sickened them, and Lucas could see this. This wasn't so for Eleven, simply because she'd killed before in the name of survival...but Will just didn't think any of them had ever killed anything larger than a spider or a fish. "...you can do it," he sighed, shaking his head. Sure, he wanted it dead. That didn't particularly mean he wanted it to suffer.

"Okay," Lucas replied after a momentary silence. Will nodded, regarding the cup sternly as Lucas knelt down to hold the flame closer. It licked at the surrounding air, eventually finding the fluid and instantly spreading across the pit, clinging desperately to the oil. Lucas and Dustin immediately went about placing the kindling onto the flames, and El watched as the tiny needles and shreds of bark curled beneath the heat. Whatever this fire was...it seemed to destroy anything it touched, vaporizing various materials into millions of ashes. Will and Mike set about finding larger twigs and sticks to place over top of the hungry blaze as El stood a bit closer, unable to take her eyes from the brilliant conflagration. She thought that if she got any closer, she'd feel the heat emanating from the pile. A confused Lucas followed her awestruck gaze and noticed something, "The cup's melting!" They all rushed back to their sides, kneeling before the fire. Sure enough, the liquid spilled out, some of it effortlessly smothering the flames in a process that made El's head turn, while another good portion steamed into the air, evaporating at the very warmth of the tiny inferno. The slug sat in a moistened circle of safety and seemed to animate, writhing about in terrible misperception. They all reared back a bit at this disturbing display, El creasing her brow at the miniature abomination. "What's it doing?" Lucas squinted his eyes at it.

Will shook his head, following its movements, "I don't know..."

"Guys...I never thought about this but..." Dustin trailed off, eyeing the slug worriedly. His silence disturbed them.

"...Dustin, what?!" Mike demanded.

"Just tell us!" Lucas pried.

"...what if...it can't burn? See how it's body is all wet and slimy?" They all looked, their fears suddenly gripping them like they currently choked Dustin. "Oh God...what if it doesn't die? Why didn't I think of this before!?" he fretted, his hands going to the sides of his head.

"It's going to die!" Mike assured. "We came out here to kill it and that's what we're gonna do. It *will* burn!" He tried to speak above their swirling doubt in a confident, emboldening manner. They waited for the slug to aimlessly move into the surrounding flames, but instead, it began to burrow *down* into the moistened soil, directly beside the disintegrating cup. Their expressions were mixed with horror.

"It's getting away!" Lucas shrieked. Mike up and rushed about like a wild deer, hastily searching for something.

"Somebody grab it!" Will exclaimed, extending a tentative hand above the flames.

Dustin slapped his arm away, "Are you *crazy?! You're wearing long sleeves!*"

"Guys it's going!" Lucas shouted, craning his neck and trying to find it within the earth. Mike returned with a stick just as his friends went silent. They watched as the slug floated into the air, dirt still clinging to its oily form. Mike dropped the stick as the source of their hysteria was lifted up and over the flames. El's mind worked on it like a piece of meat as Will sat directly across from her, witnessing her power for the first time...and *immediately* fearing it. Her eyes never left the object as she glared at the slug, her hatred well-placed and scorching. With a flinch of her left eyelid and a squeeze of her fists, the slug was *crushed*, it's body folding in on itself much to Will's horror. Goo dripped from its corpse, leaking into the ground. Mike's face was frozen as he observed Will's terrified expression, deepening every second with dismay.

"See? I *told* you she could do it!" Lucas stood, pressing Mike's shoulder with a knowing finger. The slug dropped to the ground,

warped beyond recognition, and Mike could only read the cold panic behind Will's eyes as he continued watching her face.

"Guys? She's *bleeding*..." Will spoke, his eyes locked with hers while she blinked them slow and drowsily, an unusual wave of fatigue hitting her like a speeding car. They all crowded around their odd friend, Lucas peering up to check their surroundings.

"El? El are you okay?!" Mike gripped her shoulders, facing her expectantly. The color was drained from her skin and her eyes looked hollow and starved. Blood leaked from a single nostril but dripped from both her ears. Will watched in shock.

"Ugh!" Lucas expressed his revulsion at the unsettling sight. Mike's hands on her shoulders were the only thing supporting her as he found out the hard way. When he removed one hand to peer over at their bikes, she instantly began leaning to the side until Dustin hastily braced her with his own shoulder.

"Mike this is bad..." he commented, eyeing the streak of blood beneath her right earlobe. "Why is it this bad?!"

"I-I don't know!" he exclaimed hopelessly. "I don't even think *she* knows!"

"This makes no damn sense...she *flipped a van* and it wasn't even this bad..." Dustin sighed as her head slumped sideways, resting on his shoulder. Her brow raised considerably, Eleven's eyes flickered shut like the flames dwindling beside them and Mike almost instantly broke into a panicked frenzy.

"El?! EL!"

"-here..." Dustin shifted so she could lean all her weight against him, her head still cradling his shoulder. Then, as if their mass-hysteria needed more fueling, sirens drifted lazily on the wind as a chase persisted far away, yet so close within the borders of their tiny town.

"S-Should I go get someone?!" Will asked, entirely dumbfounded at the sudden emergency they'd been hurtled into.

"NO!" Mike blurted almost angrily. He knelt, holding the back of his



hand inches before her blood-soaked nostrils. "...I...I think she's breathing..." he announced hopefully.

"Yeah...I can hear her," Dustin nodded as Lucas fished in his bag for some stray cloth. Will stood anxiously beside his crouched friends, his heart racing and his limbs quaking with fear.

"I-Is she...gonna be okay?" he asked.

"Yeah...this always happens whenever she uses her powers..." Lucas explained, eyeing him assuredly.

"**Lucas!** It's never *been* this bad!" Mike rebuked, shooting him an incredulous leer. Without hesitation, he returned the look.

"*Yes it has!*" he argued, trying to defuse the situation.

The pale one rolled his eyes beneath the stray casts of sunlight, "...okay fine! You're right, it did happen, but only when she was fighting the Demogorgon! And then she *disappeared!*" His voice rocked with distress; this was *exactly* what Mike had asked her **not** to do, and yet she'd done it! There were other ways to deal with the creature... couldn't she see that?! His breath was quick and short as he returned his pointed gaze to her sleeping face.

"Mike! I *think* if she was gonna disappear, she would've *done* it by now!" Lucas tried to talk some sense into his friend. Suddenly, El's eyes drifted open as she blinked at the glaring light. "See?! She's already waking up!" Mike ignored him, immediately going over El's expression with troubled eyes.

"What's so different about this time...?" Dustin speculated aloud, puzzling as the weight of her throbbing cranium slowly left his shoulder.

Mike began showering her with unanswerable questions. "El! Are you okay?"

"Well...she killed it..." Lucas chimed in, eyeing the slug indifferently.

Dustin's eyes widened as she eyed him curiously, removing her head from his shoulder in a drained fashion. "I think I know the answer..."

he trailed off, uncertainty tainting his words as he watched her carefully.

"Can it wait?" Mike asked, eager to return home and put this behind them. She needed to rest somewhere safe, he didn't care how much of a butt Lucas was being.

"Yeah...it'll actually be easier to explain at your house," he agreed cryptically. Before Mike could even express any kind of questioning glance, a penetrating explosion of a sound pierced the air. They all jumped, gazing fearfully through the trees and towards the horizon of Indiana. An ominous wind tousled the bright green foliage almost mockingly as the five children stood together in cold silence, now questioning whether it was even safe for them to return home at all.

Four more bursts rang out, and they all quickly recognized their tremulous tone as having come from gunshots. Struck into silence, they all gazed worriedly at each other, suddenly wishing they weren't alone in this forest, wanting desperately to be back with their parents and siblings, protected within the walls of their warm, familiar houses. "...we should go..." Will finally murmured. Wordlessly, they all rushed to their feet, El stumbling a bit and dropping to her knees. Dustin and Mike immediately rushed back, helping her up and practically lifting her to Mike's bike.

Will and Lucas were already settled, "Come on! Let's go!"

"Okay okay!" Mike shouted as Dustin helped the girl onto his bike. Lucas didn't even acknowledge this agitation; he was far too busy keeping a watchful eye for white vans or black cars.

"-there you go," Dustin sighed, rushing from El to hastily snatch his bag, slinging it around his shoulders. Lucas took off as Will peered back at Mike, who was waiting rather impatiently for Dustin to get moving. Eventually they rode off again, leaving the fort behind them and rushing back to Maple Street. El gripped Mike's jacket, resigning her cheek to his back as she fought off bouts of dizziness and a horrid pain in her left temple. Lucas led the way, his shoulders acting as Will's anchors as he held them for support.

Will shook his head, mumbling into the wind, "This is all my fault..."

"What?!" Lucas shouted over the air as it noisily rushed past them.

"...forget it," he closed his eyes regretfully as they braked at an intersection. The others were now close enough to hear.

"Forget *what?!'*" Lucas demanded, snapping all their eyes towards them.

"Nothing!" Will rose his voice defensively.

"**Hey!**" Dustin warned in a panting voice. "Why are you guys arguing?" Mike squinted at them in the blinding sunlight as El's grip got a little tighter.

"Man I don't *know...*" Lucas shrugged annoyingly as if Will's hands were burning his shoulders. "He said something and I couldn't hear him-"

"It's *actually* nothing, okay? Just forget about it," Will poorly covered, only making his friends more suspicious. The light turned green and they continued riding in silence, though Will felt with the way they eyed him, there was going to be a *long* discussion when they got back.

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: So it's been a long time since I last uploaded - or at least it feels that way - and I just wanted to thank those people who have been reading this story from the beginning. So...that may be all of you, since it'd be a little weird to jump into a story on the twenty-second chapter...*ANYWAY*, you guys are honestly the best. If it weren't for your support, I may have lost my inspiration to continue this long ago. Now, some of you may be wondering how long this story will be. I can't really give a good estimate...but I do have a checklist in mind. Certain things still need to happen, various issues must be resolved, etc. I **genuinely** appreciate you for taking the time to read this story. Follow for more updates! Keep on writing! - *Nightlock*

## 23. Beginning of the End

Authors Note: I JUST WANNA SAY...I'm changing the formatting for the titles. Spelling the numbers out is getting too long and I can't fit the chapter names in...so, yeah. That's happening. I'll change the rest when I get a chance. Enjoy!

### Chapter Twenty-Three – Beginning of the End

"Hey...why's he stopping?" Cal pressed into the brakes, a cold apprehension sweeping over him.

"SLOW DOWN..." Powell demanded, watching as the man before them exited his vehicle, pointing a handgun at *their* windshield. Tires screeched as Cal slammed his foot into the brake pedal, inadvertently swinging the passenger side of the car towards the gunman. Powell drew his weapon, aiming it warningly at the criminal as Cal jumped from the car, crouching behind the safe side. "Cal!" he shouted, watching as the man contemplated shooting him, some kind of invisible energy holding him back like a leashed tiger.

Shivering with fear, Cal slammed his arms onto the roof of their patrol car, gripping a pistol disdainfully and aiming it at the perpetrator. "Don't shoot man! Drop your weapon!" His voice quavered as Powell hastily climbed past the module, spilling out onto the safe side beside Cal.

"YOU CAN'T PROVE ANYTHING!" the man shouted, waving his gun around in the air. They were on a pretty empty highway, but cars still slowed down to watch this interaction, staring awestruck at the gunman making his scene.

"What-?" Cal muttered to himself as he felt something grip his shirt.

Powell yanked Cal to the ground, taking his place. "Hey man! **Put the gun down!** You *don't* have to do this!" he screamed across the stretch of blacktop that separated them and an apparent maniac.

"...YES I DO...yes I do..." the gunman replied in a shaky confirmation. The two vehicles sat parallel each other, a good thirty

yards apart, acting as barriers more than transportation at this point.

"What the *hell* is this guy's problem?" Cal asked in a strained whisper, his fingers trembling impulsively.

"I don't know, and I'm *not* about to ask him!" The senior officer crouched beside Cal, who sat closest to the driver's seat. "Try and grab the pager for me...and keep your head **down!**" he instructed, gripping his shoulder tightly.

"O-Okay," Cal nodded, removing his hat and sneaking his torso across the seat. Powell returned to his standing position, hoping he could talk some sense into this senseless man. After sliding his arm across, Cal grasped at the pager desperately, stretching his fingers and fumbling with the clip that held it into place. It hummed with static as desperate voices resonated from within its chambers, demanding their location and status. Nothing like this usually happened around here, but whenever it had, Callahan had never been on duty. This was his first experience dealing with an armed individual...and he was very petrified. Powell searched for the gunman – who had disappeared around the bumper of his truck – and was about to call for him when his eyes broadened. Suddenly, there he was, rounding the corner and brandishing a *shotgun* like a trophy.

"HEY! DROP YOUR-!" Powell was cut off by the piercing sound of shattering glass. A spray of bullets punctured his car and they both reflexively ducked, covering their heads as shards of window flurried their bodies. He could hear Cal cry out in pain as a flicker of something beyond fear erupted within him...and he faintly recognized the sweltering heat of anger.

"YOU WON'T TAKE ME!" the man shouted, pumping a single round of spent ammunition from the scorching chamber. Before another onslaught of bullets could barrage their vehicle, Powell stood, aiming his gun at the smiling psychopath. A split-second of terror riveted him, as if he were standing before a speeding train that could be instantaneously stopped at the pull of a trigger. So, with a lack of options, Powell unloaded four shots into the man, watching as he flinched behind each impact. All four pierced his blotchy skin and he dropped to the ground, his life slipping from him with every beat of his cold, twisted heart.

"Ah..." Cal gasped, clutching his shoulder. Powell immediately lowered his guard, returning to his partner's side. A considerable amount of blood had already soaked into the blue of his shirt, the bullet lodged painfully into the niche between his collar bone and chest plate. Powell perceived all of this, going to the trunk and removing a first aid kit. He slammed it onto the ground besides the downed officer as Powell gripped the bloody radio.

"Shots fired...I repeat: shots fired! Officer down! Suspect has been neutralized...we're gonna need EMS personnel **ASAP!**" he spoke quickly into the mouthpiece, then ditched it onto the driver's seat. Back at the station, other officers bolted out of their seats as Flo squeezed the life from her pen. Deliberately, she removed her glasses, blinking in recognition of Powell's distraught voice. Deep lines of worry marred her already aged expression and she closed her eyes as the deputies scrambled through the doorway, scurrying into their cars and racing off. She didn't try to stop them, even though she *knew* this was a gross misallocation of resources...one Hopper would NEVER condone, even during high-strung times like these. Beneath the unrelenting sunshine, Powell began digging inside the box, his fingers catching on sterile water, gauze pads, but most noticeably...a pair of trauma shears.

"H-Hey man..." Cal groaned, now entirely horizontal and wincing in pain as the senior officer cut his shirt open. His glaringly pale belly nearly blinded him as it stained itself with red streaks. Though his breathing was labored, he maintained his repete for always speaking his mind quite miraculously. "Do...do you even know what you're doing?"

"Be quiet. Save your energy..." Powell assured in a confident tone. "Don't worry...I got him," he added, testing the wound with a smarting press of his palm. Cal groaned in agony as his vision blurred and he struggled to shove the dark hand away. "...stop...**stop it!**"

"*You're not an EMT!*" his voice pitched as he shouted fact at his partner.

"*I know!* It's *gonna* hurt Cal...you better get used to it..." Powell barked back. The pale one sighed, shaking his head fretfully. "I'm all you got right now...and I may have watched them do this...once or

twice..."

"Once?!" he strained with his neck, expressing his alarm as Powell shrugged. "Oh my god...I think I'm going into shock..." the man suddenly droned, raising a hand to rub his forehead blankly. His head dropped back onto the pavement as he speculated, "This must be what dying feels like..."

"...would you cut that crap out?! You're *not* gonna die!"

"I don't know...I feel *really* woozy..." he moaned, his eyelids fluttering slightly in the wind.

"You're losing blood...it's a normal reaction," Powell stated, eyeing the ominous pool of maroon resting atop the highway. "...you're gonna be fine. *Trust* me."

"But..." Cal breathed through his words, his paleness now a bit disconcerting. "...statistics say that if you can't survive your first-"

"-Hey Cal?"

He swallowed the pit in his throat, gazing up at his partner as he crouched, outlined spectacularly against the radiant sun. "...yeah?"

"No offense, but *screw* your statistics," he insisted with a knowing nod, his hands clasping gauze into the wound. It took a moment, but Cal laughed a lethargic chuckle.

"Oh...wow..." he moaned, his dizziness sweeping him about like a leaf in a maelstrom. "...you're gonna have to tell the Chief...that I ate the last donut...back at the station..."

Powell rolled his eyes endearingly, "How about you tell him yourself? EMS should be here in a few minutes...now quit talkin' like that!" Powell observed as the man gazed straight out in front of him, his eyes getting lost in the near matching depths of the perfect blue sky. An uncertain tremor tore through his body as he watched, knowing his words and limited medical attention were *all* he could offer his injured friend. "Stay with me man...you *gotta* calm down..."

Cal's gaze only lasted a single moment until he finally asked him in a

slightly timorous tone, "Powell...where's the Chief?" Oddly enough, he realized that he didn't want to see him. First, he let men in suits take Lonnie Byers, *then* he gets **shot** by some *crazed* lunatic in a rusty truck. If he survived this, Cal didn't think it would matter; he was *positive* Hop would *kill* him out of sheer frustration.

Powell sighed, peering over his shoulder as two ambulances raced towards them, their sirens blaring in flashes of red and blue. "I don't know man..." The two officers crouched beneath the endless stretch of cerulean, one of them peering down and the other gazing up, straight into the limitless depths. "...I don't know..."

"I want you to understand something before we continue any further..." His voice was a shrill, middle-ranged tenor, able to send chills down your spine at the drop of a syllable. It didn't help that the creep stood taller than the Chief, though Hop was sure he could floor this geriatric if it ever came to that. "The girl is *our* responsibility. We have an obligation to ensure her safety."

*Bullshit.* Hop filled the room with dwindling cigarette smoke...this was the second time Brenner had offered him one from his pack, and the second time he'd taken it. "You wanna know what I think?"

"I could easily do without, but sure," he shrugged with an irrelevance that twisted Hop's patience into a ball of lava.

"...I think you spend more time tailoring your suits than you do raising her." Brenner chuckled at this, shaking his head and eyeing the floor. "...she's like your *pet*. Your attack dog...a Cujo for your damn experiments." He could go on belittling her, but Hop didn't have the heart for it. Meanwhile, Brenner was eagerly awaiting more references.

"Haven't gotten to read that yet...but I've heard it's brilliant," he sighed, suddenly approaching the table and splaying his crooked hands across its smooth surface. His ears stood out red against his white hair, as he forced himself to quell his brewing contempt. "For the resources we had, I believe we raised her appropriately. She can read and count...our medical staff ensured she was given the best treatments..."



"-did you *feed* her?" Hop broke in, balancing the smoke between his index and middle fingers. "Have you *seen* her eat anything?"

Brenner chuckled, shaking his head and pushing his hands into his pockets. "Yes...we gave her two meals a day. She even has her own room..."

Hop glared at him beneath his brow, "I know." The scientist eyed him suspiciously. "I saw it while your security guards were playing hide-and-seek..."

"Then you can understand...this is *her* home. Those two families... Joyce Byers...you're risking their lives by keeping her," he warned in that creaky voice. It sounded like old nails on a chalkboard.

Hop shook his head, "...does she even know who the President is?"

"Come now...don't be *foolish*. We would never be so cruel to her..."

"What do you **mean**?! What you're doing **is** cruel!" Hop's voice boomed in the tiny room, his fists clenching.

Brenner locked eyes with him, "No...what *you're* doing is going to traumatize her." Hop ground his teeth together, his cheeks flushing and his ears shading a deep, furious red. "The *cruelest* thing you could ever do to someone in captivity is push their face to a window," Brenner explained, as if this were some simple mathematical equation with an even simpler solution. A shudder ravaged Hop's spine and his throat closed up...because – politically speaking – Brenner was **right**. "And I *know* you **hated** Lonnie...I did too, once he'd confessed to what he'd done." This took Hopper aback; he couldn't imagine Brenner losing it over someone *hurting* Eleven. She'd only killed *half* his men. "Still...I knew that after I'd shot him, we'd need your cooperation in bringing her here." Hop zoned out into the grey of the table, getting lost in the endless color. His heart pitched about nervously and he began counting his options, like a cornered animal who knows it's about to die. "It would be so simple for us to... *erase* them from the picture..." he watched his jaw tighten as he swallowed nervously.

"...you sure about that?" It was Hop's turn to chuckle, he wasn't sure

he could do anything else at this point. His fatigue had deserted him, parting him with an empty numbness akin to indifference. "...I remember that not working out so well last time..."

Brenner's face went cold and stern, though he smiled contentedly, "Will Byers was a *very* lucky boy. He survived simply because we allowed it." Hop eyed him incredulously, marveling at how even his words were.

"You're lying," Hop returned just as squarely, though his voice went up in surprise as he creased his brow. "You didn't know what that thing was, so don't pretend you did..." He met Brenner's smile with a cold glare. "...you *still* don't know what it is, do you?"

"We had plenty of reason to believe it was killed...along with Eleven." *How dare you*, Hop seethed. *How dare you say her name so easily*. Brenner clasped his hands comfortably behind his back, slowly circling the room. "If she's alive...what do you think that means for the creature?"

Hop tilted his head at him, lowering his brow. "You're insane if you think she has any connection with that thing..."

"Am I? Is it too hard to imagine? Here *you* are talking like you've seen the beast," Brenner countered as Hop dropped into a silence, his frown deepening. "...you don't know it all, Chief. So don't *pretend* you do." Brenner stopped pacing just to stand directly beside him, leaning close with those crooked hands against the table. He glared at Hop accusingly, "I felt it *claw* into my skin. I witnessed its power in that *dinky* school and I *know*...it is very real."

Hop eyed him, taking a drag from the cigarette coolly, "...doctors must've did a number on you."

Brenner scoffed, suddenly removing his jacket and unbuttoning his shirt, "...they did the best they could." Hop watched as the man opened his shirt, a white bandage wrapped snugly around his torso. What the Chief rapidly noticed sent cold tremors coursing through his body as his arm slowly resigned itself to the table, the smoke still balanced between those two fingers. Abnormal, vein-like tendrils snaked beneath Brenner's pale skin, reaching up past the bandage and

towards his chest like menacing claws. It scarcely resembled a horrible case of blood poisoning, wracking his body with some kind of alter-dimensional pestilence. Hop eyed him astoundingly as he began closing the top, his lips tight-set in an irritated frown. "We need her to destroy the portal before anything else comes through. Another breach would be...*catastrophic*..."

The already unsettling atmosphere only thickened at this, most of it going straight to Hop's stomach. It sounded like Brenner was actually telling the truth, though that alone was hard to believe. Still, it had Hopper scared stiff. If they could agree on anything at all, it was that they didn't need any more missing children or satanic monsters roaming the town. But leading Eleven here would be doing *exactly that*...just with different monsters and closed spaces. "This is where you come in...you are going to bring her to us, or we will kill you and everyone you love." Their glares were locked as the beginnings of terror glinted in Hopper's blue eyes. The man leered knowingly, then proceeded to feed him his own words, "*That's* what's going to happen." Hop couldn't help it, a cold sweat slacked his frigid skin. His eyes found the table as the demands rooted themselves in his memory, his heart racing miles before his mind. Everything Joyce and he had fought for, suddenly eviscerated into waste and futility. Hopper sat, statuesque, his fists clenched and jaw tight as a drum. He couldn't bear to think of her without feeling guilty and nauseous. Brenner made it sound like keeping the girl here was what she wanted and "for a good cause." It was as if he'd forgotten that she'd ran off for a *reason*. The love Joyce and he had for this child...Hop gazed absently at this wolf of a man, his face dangerously close to the Chief's. He couldn't allow it.

"It doesn't matter if you refuse. It just means you'll become responsible for their deaths..." His stomach lurched as Brenner continued, "It's quite simple, actually...if you do as I say, no one has to die...no one else anyway...but we *will* receive the child." They still had Lonnie looming over him like an anvil...and Hopper had nothing. Nothing to exchange...nothing to bargain except their *lives*. After a long moment spent staring at the Chief, awaiting an answer, he shook his head, releasing the table and waltzing about the room in a contemplative manner. He wished he could just dispatch him right here and now ...but it would leave a terrible stain on the community.

Hawkins would come looking...and they didn't need that benevolent attention from the press. Hop's gaze turned downcast, his eyes widening considerably as a war raged within, ripping his heart in two. Brenner's hand was suddenly on the doorknob, peering over his shoulder at the dumbfounded individual, "I'll give you a moment to decide..." Hop didn't acknowledge this, regarding the man just as disdainfully through his peripheral view. Swirling anger molded in Brenner's stomach. *Children were so much easier to work with... malleable, impressionable...naïve.* He knew Hop was a realized man in or around his forties...and that his resolve would be much harder to snap. A venomous grin, and then the door was closed, and Hopper was alone amidst the swirling smoke. His cigarette had glowered to a butt, untouched and slightly scorching his social finger. Hop shook it from his hand, finally realizing the pain as the ashes plummeted to the table. They stood out against the sterility of the everything, and Hop already craved another. He peered across the table at Dr. Brenner's jacket, draped thoughtlessly over the back of a chair.

"Are you feeling better?" Mike asked, helping her climb down from the bicycle. She nodded, though it wasn't very convincing; her movements still wavered alarmingly. The sun hung low in the sky, and Mike was in a hurry in case his parents had heard the echoing gunshots. So he helped her into the basement, his friends following close behind.

"Snack time?" Dustin asked a careful Mike. The boy nodded, helping El relax against the couch. Lucas and Will eyed each other a tad ashamedly.

As Dustin raced upstairs, eager to raid Mike's cabinets for those Nilla Wafers he absolutely *loved*, Lucas spoke, "Sorry for...being a jerk back there..."

"Yeah...me too," Will nodded, pursing his lips thoughtfully.

"Will?" Eleven suddenly spoke up as Mike wiped her ears free of blood. They all turned their attention to her as she uttered the motto, "Friends don't lie." Lucas eyed Will a little teasingly, grinning sideways at him as the boy peered down retrospectively. While sitting beside her on the cushions, her profile presented itself perfectly in the soft basement lighting and Mike eyed her

thoughtfully, smiling to himself as he continued to clean beneath her ear. When his cloth-covered finger nearly dipped *inside* her ear and she flinched, shooting him a shuddering look in a knee-jerk reaction.

"Sorry..." he whispered, baring his teeth at her as she simpered back. "...she's right you know," Mike promptly added, his dark eyes suddenly locking onto Will's hazel ones. *Oh great...* Will thought, returning a bashful expression.

"...I know," Will finally said as Dustin clambered down the steps, hauling two armfuls of food. "It's just...I feel like it's...*my* fault..."

This took them all by surprise. "What is?" Dustin broke in, dropping the food onto the table.

"...her being...like *that*," Will gestured as they glanced El's way. Mike had switched to gingerly wiping her nose, but stopped the instant Will had said "my fault." The cloth rested below her nostrils and she gingerly took it from him, eyeing the boy just as disconcertingly.

"How could it be *your* fault?" Mike blurted out, a little angry but very perplexed.

"Yeah, this *always* happens," Lucas assured. "Sometimes it's even *worse*...she's fine!" He motioned towards her self-assuredly.

"No, I mean the slugs! That's on me! They're *coming* from *inside of me*!" he pointed dramatically to his stomach. "Sometimes I can feel them-"

"-oh! Gross!" Mike waved a hand at him, grimacing. El's brow pinched at him worriedly.

"Ewww..." Dustin droned, munching on a wafer. "People are eating here!"

"Yeah, please...no visuals..." Lucas asked as Will chuckled into a sigh.

"Will, it's *not* your fault. You can't help that you're sick!" Mike insisted.

"Yeah, we can't help that you're pregnant..." Dustin grinned his

toothless smile as Will shuddered mechanically.

"EW!" Mike exclaimed, eyeing him but grinning nonetheless.

"Dude..." Lucas hissed.

"What?! It's a *theory*!" he defended the gut-curdling idea.

"I don't know..." Will sighed, peering down at the carpet. "Sometimes I just...feel like a traitor...somehow. It's stupid...like, what happened today. We could've gotten hurt, all because of me!"

Before his friends could intervene and tear down this misplaced guilt, something sucker punched their ears, "Michael?!" Karen stormed down the basement steps. Nancy peered from the top at them, immediately recognizing that Eleven was not well. The child met her gaze evenly, distinguishing her worried expression.

"-oh, hey Mom!" Mike greeted her as she peered about the room, seemingly counting the number of heads. Her eyes stopped momentarily on the girl, glad to notice that what was left of her bruise was a small, soft hint of red. To everyone's relief, Mike had cleaned the blood in time and there was hardly an indication of her altered status besides her absent expression. Luckily enough, only Nancy and the boys could see that. Karen was just relieved her furniture hadn't been moved across the room or flipped upside down; she achieved great solace from the settling of trivial matters like these.

"Apparently...there's been some kind of accident in town..." Karen announced. Despite being well-equipped for the little things, she'd handled this situation quite well. "I've called your parents and they've all given you permission to stay over, if you like." The boys all broke into bright smiles as Eleven beamed between them.

"Really Mom?!" Mike enthused as his friends exchanged vibrant glances.

Her son was so ecstatic with this news that he hadn't noticed Karen's distant gaze through the basement, though to be fair, she was trying to keep it as imperceptible as possible. "Of course...but you should

stay inside for a while. Just until we know what's going on..."

"Sure!" Mike hastily agreed.

Will chimed in, "Yep!"

"No problem!" Dustin added, munching on a wafer. Karen eyed him a moment and he stopped chewing, staring back alarmingly. Quite awkwardly, he held one out to her, "...you want some?"

A moment passed where all she did was stare, but eventually she sighed. Nancy watched, thoroughly entertained. *Whoa...Mom is way more frazzled than she lets on.* "...oh what the heck," she exhaled, pinching five between her fingers. Dustin slowly lowered his hand, the wafer still pressed between his fingers. The woman smiled at them all, then hastily rushed upstairs, closing the door behind her. Nearly everyone turned to look at Mike, trying to hide their laughter.

"...what?" he spoke. "She's probably just worried about the gunshots...guys..." The rest of the boys burst out laughing as Mike rolled his eyes.

"And I thought *my* mom acted crazy..." Will joked while Lucas tapped him encouragingly on the shoulder.

"No Will, your mom *is* crazy," Mike corrected in a punctual tone that made everyone chuckle. The chorus of their laughter combined to create a touching melody, the likes of which Eleven had never heard until now. The sounds made her cheeks flush and her heart light and airy, and she felt like adding to it. Everyone around her was either giggling, snickering or full-bellied laughing – the kind Will released so easily – but Eleven simply hadn't cultivated her signature chuckle quite yet. So she grinned, the beginnings of a chortle pushing little bursts of air through her nose and smile, her shoulders trembling slightly.

The door opened and Brenner could see Hop lighting himself a second cigarette, lounging comfortably in the chair as he fed into his habit. He almost couldn't recognize him, his posture drastically altered, nothing about his body language expressing fear. "...you guys got a bathroom in here?" Hop asked, frowning at the silver haired

man.

"...have you made your decision?" Brenner pressed, his fuse nearly burnt to a crisp.

Hop eyed him, standing up and gesturing about with his hands, "What? You gonna keep me from using the bathroom too?" He shook his head incredulously, "If you gotta go, you gotta go...a guy your age should get that."

Brenner locked his jaw, wanting to smile at Hop and run him through with a knife at the same time. Instead, he bided his rage, pursing his lips and nodding, his gaze trailing to Hop's shoes. "Right this way," he finally gestured, forcing himself not to look at the man.

"Thank you," Hopper sighed halfheartedly, walking past him and mentally patting himself on the back. Their footsteps echoed softly against the walls as several uniformed officials and coated scientists watched him pass. Brenner followed close behind, his mere presence reassuring them all. Still, despite their piercing stares and wondering glances, a giddy excitement welled within the Chief, thoroughly mixing with an overbearing dread.

"On your left," Brenner motioned as Hop sidestepped into the bathroom. Rather than wait outside, the scientist followed him, standing with his back against the tiled wall near the exit. Hop was about to enter a stall when he peered back at the only other man in the room, his hand gripping a privacy door.

"You know...I wouldn't stand there unless you had a hazmat suit on, at *least*," he squinted his eyes at him.

"It's a simple precaution..." Brenner nodded understandably, wishing he could laugh at this veiled warning. "Just do what you need to."

Hop nodded, his eyes still squinted, "...okay." He closed the stall, dropped his pants and sat on the toilet. The seat was *ice* cold against his ass and before he did anything, he reached for a hastily folded paper inside his coat pocket. As silently as he could, Hop unfolded Eleven's birth certificate, his eyes hastily raking over it. Jane Ives was printed atop the thick black line. He'd taken another paper as well,



something containing her medical information...but this was good enough. He'd simply wanted to stare at it, absorbing more confidence with every second that ticked by as he formulated a last-minute plan. Nothing was set in stone...Hop knew this. This was progress...as meager as it seemed. He had to force himself to appease them just a little longer, until he could think of a way out...for *all* of them.

After a few aggravatingly long minutes, the Chief left the stall, immediately going to the door. He noticed Brenner's hesitation, expecting him to turn or at least make ready to leave, but his back remained to the wall as Hop eyed him humorously. "...are you gonna sue me for not washing my hands too?"

Suddenly, the cold barrel of a pistol lay flush against his forehead. The Chief froze, his hands splayed before him as he stared into the monster's eyes. "It has taken *all* of my patience not to **kill** you today," he warned in a hissing growl. "DO NOT test me, Hopper."

"OKAY OKAY...I'll **wash** my hands," he exclaimed, waving them in the air a bit.

Infuriated, Brenner pressed the metal painfully into Hop's cranium. Jim's heart thudded in his chest, and to him, it sounded more like a timer counting down than a contracting muscle. Any second now, it would *really* all be over and his careful planning would truly be all for naught. Cold fear swept through his veins as their eyes bore holes into each other. A heart-stopping moment passed where Brenner pursed his lips and Hop expected him to shoot. His heartbeat – which had previously been so loud and fast he wondered if Brenner could hear it – nearly stopped. The Chief **knew** he could break out of this and take the gun, (if he was lucky and swift enough) but he didn't. He wanted to test him, betting on his own vitality when it came to Brenner's operation. *If he didn't need me, he would've killed me. If he didn't need me, he would've killed me. If...*

Brenner glared at him, his jaw clenching noticeably as he lowered the weapon. He ordered him through clenched teeth, "Bring her to me." Then, he stood aside, allowing Hopper access to the door...access he *didn't* hesitate to grab. Hop wouldn't dare walking to the sink, knowing the ice was already paper-thin. They strode down the hall, back to their makeshift conference room. Hop entered – like before –

and Brenner *slammed* the door shut behind them. The scientist took his coat, burrowing an arm through a sleeve as Hopper caught his breath, trying to keep his horror discreet.

"...when do you want her?" he mimicked a sense of loss and defeat in his words, one Brenner *immediately* fell for.

"I'm giving you a week to devise your own strategy..." Brenner began, slipping his arm through the second sleeve. "**One week** to bring her here **by yourself**...understand?" He adjusted the suit, yanking it this way and that. Every movement haunted Hopper as he tried not to stare at his fussiness.

"One week...got it," he drowned his words in a negative tone.

"Good. Do it during the night. When you bring her, you may not wear your uniform. Wear street clothing....and if you know what's good for you, she *must* be asleep or unconscious...at the very least, blindfolded." Hop wanted to kill him...so badly; he'd never felt such an urge swell within him before. *How could he do this to Joyce? To Eleven?* "You will drive to the front gate and say the word, 'Leo,' to the greeter. He will let you pass and you will drive into the complex. You will step out and away from your vehicle with your hands up. Once we have taken her inside, you will be paid handsomely for your cooperation and escorted from the compound." Hop's rage burned within him, only half-listening to his careful instructions. "After that, you will never have to worry about her again." A deep pit formed in his stomach, his face bereft of any emotion besides cold guilt. "Are we clear?"

His throat was so dry he felt he could swig down an ocean. He swallowed, hoping his next reply wouldn't come out strangled or croaky. "...crystal."

The thick book opened before them with a thud, incisive fingers flipping the pages. "I know it's in here somewhere..." Dustin sighed, scouring each page a second or two each.

"What are you looking for?" the wizard asked, peering over Dustin's shoulder.

Dustin kept his eyes glued to the book, mumbling something to himself in-comprehensively. Will eyed Lucas as the boy shrugged back, pursing his lips hopelessly. His blue eyes trekked along the columns, suddenly exclaiming, "FOUND IT!" He slammed a finger onto a long, bold-printed definition, clearing his throat. "The law of conservation of energy," Dustin began as Eleven blinked absently at him. "No energy can be created or destroyed...only changed from one form into another." Dustin looked up to find them all staring at him, entirely lost. "Oh *come on* guys! Mr. Clarke **just** went over this!"

Lucas, Will and Mike exchanged mischievous glances. Will raised his hand, classroom style, "I think I should get a free pass...I was in the hospital and-"

"-NO, you were *in class* when he taught it. I *remember*," Dustin corrected him as Will snickered bashfully.

"Okay...so, what does that have to do with Eleven?" Mike cut in.

"Well, you remember that one time she flipped the van?" Their minds turned redolent, their hearts pattering faster as they reimagined the awesome spectacle. Mike remembered her grip firm on his jacket and her breath warm against his back the instant she'd saved their lives, glaring over his shoulder.

"Oh no, we...*totally* forgot that," Lucas pursed his lips as Mike chuckled. Will smiled along with the girl, eyeing her curiously.

"Okay *ha ha*...but seriously! That must've taken a *massive* amount of energy, considering that the van was *speeding* towards us and we were riding towards *it*..." Dustin rambled off, refocusing himself. "And Lucas, you remember when she threw you?"

Lucas pretended to glare at her, squinting his eyes playfully. "...how could I forget?" he uttered in a phony malicious voice.

"Okay good...now think back to that night in the school...when the bad men came." Their smiles quickly left them, including Eleven's. Will eyed them all worriedly, the bubbly atmosphere of the room quickly turning stagnant. "...she killed all those guys...and then she passed out...remember?" They all expressed quick nods as El peered

about, pursing her lips thoughtfully. "Well, it was the same thing for the Demogorgon, *and* the slug...a *tiny*, little slug. You'd think it'd be easy for her, right?"

"R-Right," Mike pitched in.

"Yeah well you're *wrong*," Dustin countered. "The difference between the van and all those other things is simple..." He paused as they all awaited his summation. "...*death*." A momentary silence as they all peered at her. Then, Lucas' brow creased and he blinked.

"Wait wait wait...the guys in the van *must've* died!" Lucas retorted, waving his hands about.

"I'm so glad you asked that!" Dustin pointed, nodding understandably. "See, when she flipped the van, that's all she did. Gravity did the rest and that's what...*probably* killed them," Dustin explained. "Like... when she threw you! She didn't mean to actually hurt you. All she did was keep you from hurting *Mike*..." he tilted his head, cooing affectionately.

"Cut it out!" Mike knocked his hand into Dustin's chest as he giggled helplessly.

"Okay, sure...whatever," Lucas shook his head, rolling his eyes. "So what?"

"When she killed the bad men and the slug *and* the Demogorgon...she *actually* did that with her *mind*. It was a direct action and reaction..." Lucas eyed Mike hopelessly as Dustin fought to regain their attention. "Okay just...*listen*..." Dustin sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "The law of conservation of energy means that no energy can be lost or destroyed...only *changed* or transferred. I'm thinking that when she killed the slug...it's dying energy drained hers more than usual. Since it was conserved, it *technically* abides by the law, and *that's* what's making her tired..." He paused, allowing the concept to slowly penetrate his friends' minds. "I **bet** that if she were to levitate a boulder and *drop* it onto a slug...she wouldn't feel tired at all. Because the *boulder* would be doing the killing...not her."

Lucas blinked, gazing down at the book in scrutiny. Will meditated

on it while Mike eyed Eleven wondrously. He wanted to ask her if she thought Dustin was right, but he knew she wouldn't be able to definitively answer. There was no way she could tell why she suddenly felt like fainting after using her powers...it was all speculation, and it frankly annoyed Mike. "So you think it's too dangerous for her to...use her powers?"

Dustin shrugged, "...not really. I just don't think she should try to kill anything." He chuckled along with his friends, though Mike sat unamused and pensive. "I think she can use her powers as long as she has food in her stomach," Dustin added, seamlessly segueing into his next topic. "*Speaking of...*which snack do you wanna try?" He gestured to the pile of goodies as she eyed them gratefully. After deciding upon a packet of gummy bears, she reached over and grasped it, tearing open the package and sniffing its contents curiously. She popped one into her mouth, her eyes snapping shut at the onslaught of sweetness. The boys giggled at this, carefully watching her face change with every flavor. Mike smiled bashfully at her, uncaring whether his friends noticed how enamored he was with all of her silly quirks and oddities. They seemed to enjoy her presence *nearly* as much as he did, and an overwhelming calm surged through him. He could feel her shoulder lightly brushing his, and it was just another reminder of how lucky he was...how lucky *they* were to have her back in their lives again.

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: Thank you so much for reading! PROPS TO DUSTIN LIKE WOW. His character needs more love, he really is the brains of the group when it comes down to it. I know...I know...Brenner needs to die. Follow for more updates! Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*

## 24. New Music

### Chapter Twenty-Four – New Music

Powell's voice came through the radio, laced with tension and distress. Those who had previously sat mundane and dream-like sorting through paperwork lifted their heads like dogs perking their ears. A mere second later, they were all on their feet, rushing past each other and coupling themselves into patrol cars. There weren't many of them – Hawkins was such a small town – but in that moment, Flo felt she was witnessing a stampede. The instant the last pair of tires rolled from the parking lot, someone was stepping through the doors, chewing her gum like a cow chews its cud. Trying to think past her immediate worries, Flo thoughtfully returned her spectacles to her eyes, gazing expectantly at the woman. The young thing seemed to be a little confused at the migration they'd both witnessed, and Flo imagined this was a completely sensible reaction...if the girl was native to this county and not a city-dweller. "What the hell was all *that* about?" she blurted before the tiniest of introductions could be established. The instant she opened her mouth, Flo immediately discerned that they wouldn't mingle well at social gatherings...or in this tiny police station.

"Well...there seems to be a bit of an emergency in the center of town..." Flo loosely explained to her greatness. It was the way she carried herself, one hand on her hip and the other hooked through her purse whilst bent in a default position at the elbow, balancing an invisible cigarette between her two fingers. Flo couldn't recognize her from anywhere around here. *Indiana's finest*...she tried to silence her uncensored thoughts. "What can I help you with today?"

"I'm tryin' to find my fiancé," she spoke at an obnoxiously loud volume past the wad of flavorless gum, hair curled to near unruly degrees. She seemed like your typical high school mean girl...except they were both adults now, conversing in a serious place of employment. Flo wasn't about to have any of that shit.

"Could I have his name?"

"...yeah, it's *Lonnie Byers*," she informed her in a matter-of-factly

attitude, as if Flo should've recognized her imagined royal status the second she'd traipsed in. Cynthia watched as the woman's brow creased with something beyond polite worry, like she had to dig back in time to go over some things before throwing her any kind of bone. "...can you help me? Or do I have to speak to that train-wreck of a Chief *Hopper*?" And at that, Flo had had **enough**.

"Ma'am, the Chief's job is to *protect* you and your family. I suggest you check your tone before asking him for any kind of help." Those pencil thin eyebrows raised at this, tiny creases defacing her dainty forehead as she scoffed, entirely taken aback. "The Chief isn't here right now," Flo added, turning in her chair to observe the bodiless office. "...and, I don't believe we have a single deputy on site either." She seemed a little too giddy delivering this news. There really was nothing she could do. She didn't have the authority to go over what happened in specifics with this lady – and she figured she would be *all* about the specifics – and Lonnie Byers was no longer in their custody.

"...are you kidding me?" she spoke up, irritation dripping from her words as much as her insufferable chewing rose the woman's blood pressure.

"Lonnie was brought in on burglary charges last night," Florence informed her as the woman stared. "He-"

"*What?!*" Flo's eyes slapped shut, trying to block out that look of incredulousness. "You're crazy! My Lonnie would *never* do somethin' like that!"

"Yes well...*he did*. And he was caught. Now, that's all I know. If you want to know more, you're going to have to wait until a deputy returns so he can go through the official report with you." Cynthia eyed her, as if she'd just been asked to sprout a second head. "Until then, you're going to have to wait here." At this, the lady pursed her lips at Flo in a mocking gesture, rolling her eyes and plopping into a seat directly across from the woman. Flo was simply thankful a counter divided them. She watched her disdainfully beneath her glasses as she dug in her purse for a cigarette, bringing it to her lips and gripping a bright pink lighter. "Oh...you can't smoke in here. Take that outside," Flo said more than asked, hoping she'd take her

act with her.

Cynthia eyed her a moment, removing the paper from her mouth and squinting, "Really?"

Flo leaned forwards a bit in her chair, her head barely hovering above the counter, "Really really." The girl rolled her eyes a third time, slamming her feet onto the floor and riding the shock-wave to a standing position. With a shake of her head, she gathered her things and waltzed outside to stand beside the doors, blowing her smoke and anger into the bright blue atmosphere. Flo sighed in relief, rubbing her forehead a little tiredly.

"Where the hell are you Hop...?" she mumbled through tightly-set lips.

The sun was nearly halfway towards the sky's apex as it blinded him, and he rose a sleep-deprived hand to block it from his view. Two uniformed guards strode behind Brenner as he personally escorted their emissary to a car. Hop's officers had been there at Hawkins Elementary, debriefing the kids the night Eleven had disappeared. Only Cal had been dimwitted enough to actually break orders and *enter* the building. Men from the state had immediately rushed him out, but what Cal had seen had struck Hop as tragedy...until now. *"There were bodies everywhere Chief...it was like they'd been torn apart..."* No wonder the kids had been walked out with their eyes closed...but still, Hop knew Brenner was low on men. Having two uniforms suddenly at his beck and call didn't impress him in the least. "You have one week, Jim..." the old man restated. "Seven nights to deliver her." His words tailed him like a lost duckling, never leaving his subconscious thoughts...always somewhere behind his immediate processes.

Just when Hop thought he'd seen enough lunacy for one day, there was that man in the grey suit again, inviting him favorably into his vehicle. Hopper didn't know who he hated more; the man who brought him here or the man who was showing him the door. Hopper gazed off towards the gate attendant, slowing to a stop beside the Ford. "Yeah...I was told I was gonna get my weapon back."

"Of course," Brenner nodded knowingly. "You will receive it at the



end of your departure." Suddenly, a thunderous gunshot threw itself into the open sky and they all flinched slightly, even Brenner. Hop's eyes deepened as his gaze locked onto the horizon. Mere seconds later, four more gunshots rang out across their quiet little town, rancorous and vindictive.

"Take me to the station," Hop instructed, hastily climbing into the black Ford and shutting the door himself.

The salesman eyed Brenner, awaiting a nod of confirmation when the tall man hacked into his sleeve, his eyes pinching shut at a scorching sensation attacking his esophagus. As he adjusted himself, Hopper noticed this tiny flicker of weakness, and he *thrived* off it, his gaze now locked on the discreetly sick man. The grey-suited driver eyed Martin a bit suspiciously as those dark eyes flicked down to the cuff of his sleeve. Tiny dots of blood stained the white, but only Brenner saw this. Still...Hop didn't necessarily require a visual. "Take him to his home. *Do not* allow him to persuade you any differently," Brenner ordered. He then leaned in, whispering so Hop couldn't hear them through the window, "Make sure his gun has been emptied."

"Of course," he obliged subserviently, tilting his head in a deep nod. The diplomat stepped into the vehicle, closing the door and driving out of the compound.

Brenner watched him go, his two guards at his flanks respectively, awaiting their next orders. "Monitor the phone lines...listen for talk of any kind..." The two men eyed each other from the corner of their eyes, standing behind Brenner. They both seemed to hesitate, waiting for the other to acknowledge this or begin striding back into the building. Brenner turned, glaring at them and ordering, "...and make sure someone is at work in the lab. This damn sickness needs to be stopped..."

One of them finally spoke up, stiffening to attention on a dime. "Will do." They both promptly turned and marched through the double doors. Brenner watched them go, feeling that sting scratch his throat again and biting back a fit of bloody coughs. He too began walking into the building, eager to get an update on the scientists' progress.

As the trees zipped by, Hop sat in the moving vehicle, clutching his

knee a little fiercely. He busied himself with sifting through Brenner's twisted agenda, trying to find the tiniest of flaws...but at the moment, he couldn't gain any considerable leverage. The facility sat many minutes behind them, but his dread and fears shadowed him like a virus, growing more potent the further he distanced himself from those emotionless monsters. *How could he face Joyce and Eleven now? What would he say?*

Hopper noticed his tiny lakeside home drift comfortably into view. The white Chevy vans were nowhere to be seen and the thought of them being everywhere at once was purely haunting. Something inside him seemed to be reverting back to its original form...back to the way he was before he'd saved Will. How he'd been able to talk to him so calmly in the hospital just last night escaped him, and Hop wasn't sure he could connect to another child like that ever again. Right now, he had to devise the most painless strategy of removing one from their lives...or not, and trying to survive the repercussions. His jaw tightened and he closed his eyes, feeling the gravity of the car decelerate and slowly angle him forward. The grey-suited man reached across the module and grasped Hop's weapon, holding it out to him. The Chief eyed the man and gun for a second, taking it wordlessly. "Thank you so much for your-"

"Don't give me that crap..." Hop stated, his glare low and threatening. A glint of fear flashed in the man's eyes, realizing he could've very well have handed him a loaded weapon. Hop picked up on this and inwardly smiled, though his face remained stoic and frozen. "Tell your boss he needs to see a different kind of doctor..." he parted with this snide remark, exiting the car and slamming the door shut. The man in the car took a moment to sigh with relief, then sped away, his tires leaving tread marks in the soil.

Once the Ford was nearly out of Hop's view, he checked his weapon for defects. It would've been WAY too risky to cap that guy...they could've sabotaged his pistol, rigged it to blow up in his face or something; it certainly seemed like something they'd attempt. Hop wasn't even confident to use it now...or ever again. But when he opened the ammo cartridge and noticed six bullets residing comfortably within their chambers, he shook his head and pursed his lips. Hop lowered the gun to his side and looked around for a

target...anything to annihilate before he raced back to the station, running on no sleep for over a day. A discarded beer can lay idle in his yard, so Hopper flicked the bullets back into place and aimed, shooting it with ease as it somersaulted into the air. *He could've done it...and he'd let the chance slip away.*

Hop shook his head at thoughts like these, knowing mindless killing would only slow him down and drop him into more unnecessary trouble. The shot from his pistol was still reverberating through the trees, though singular and quiet compared to the booming noises he'd heard minutes before. *There was definitely a difference in caliber as well as the calculated response.* As doubt swirled ominously in his mind, melting together with fear and guilt, he holstered his weapon, rushing into his patrol car and flicking his sirens on. His tires worked themselves against the earth as he sped off towards the station, not even entering his home and running on the last fumes of pure determination.

Jonathan's car pulled onto the lawn, taillights beaming red in the sunlight. Huxley was eagerly awaiting him on the porch, something dangling from his jowls nearly down to his collar bone. The teen reached down to pull it from his mouth and cringed audibly the moment his fingers clasped the string of saliva, "Ugh..." Shivers raced through his body as he flicked the substance away, opening his front door. The yellow dog rushed inside, leaving dirty paw prints on the carpet and slobbering thirstily into his water bowl. Jonathan sighed at this, knowing his mother would ask him to clean them up. That was when Joyce entered the room and spotted her son standing in the doorway.

"Jonathan!" she embraced him unexpectedly as the boy gratefully returned the gesture. "Oh God...I didn't know if you were okay! Those gunshots..."

"I know...I heard them too," Jonathan thought back to when he'd been blasting music from his radio. A certain popping noise didn't sync well with the rest of the drumbeats, and so he flicked the power off and cracked his window. He heard Powell's calculated response and flinched, rolling up the window and hightailing it home.

"Geez...just when you think things can't get any crazier!" Joyce

stressed, raising a hand to rub her forehead tiredly. Then she eyed him curiously, and Jonathan swallowed nervously. "I-I thought you were...at work. Did they evacuate you guys or...?"

"No...no nothing like that..." he stammered, eyeing the floor. Now it was Joyce's turn to worry. He sighed, unsure of how to break it to her. "...Joe let me go today..."

"What?!" she echoed. "Why? You said things were going well over there and suddenly he *fires* you?"

"I know...its, complicated..." Jonathan trailed off, closing the door behind him and crossing the room to sit on the couch. Joyce sat beside him, her eyes intense and unwavering. Something was amiss, and it was more than just the gunshots they'd heard earlier; Joyce could feel it. "...my coworker Eric...he's been stealing from my drawer every night. Joe says he knows it's him but, *his* boss doesn't believe it..."

"He *stole* money from your drawer?!" Joyce repeated, her voice lowering in awe. "A-And you *let* him?"

"Mom, I didn't know until today!" Jonathan shot back. "Joe said he'd work on something...he said he'd try to help me out and get my job back..." Joyce brought a hand up to rub her brow tiredly. This was the last thing they needed, especially with everything that was going on. They had another mouth to feed. "But Mom...look," Jonathan showed her the tiny white card. "He gave this to me. He *went out of his way* to make sure we had another chance..."

"W-What is this?" she asked, taking the card from him. This little white rectangle gave Jonathan so much hope, but Joyce only squinted at its font skeptically, turning it over in her hand.

"It's a photography company...they shoot pictures for the school...like for graduation ceremonies and sports teams..." Jonathan explained. "Mom, I could do this instead of the pharmacy...until things get sorted out anyway..." Joyce appeared very unsettled...but at least she wasn't angry *with* him. At least she understood that it hadn't been his fault.

"Jonathan..." she sighed, shaking her head and turning the card face down. "How are you gonna shoot pictures for other schools when you're *in* school?!"

"Mom I don't know..." he sighed, entirely exasperated. "Maybe they have weekend openings...but I'm almost done. Once I graduate, I'll be able to keep on doing this. I might even be able to save up for college," he suggested in a semi-hopeful tone. They knew it was a long-shot; NYU wasn't exactly an easy school to get into. Still, who was Joyce to shoot down his ambition?

"...you're right..." she sighed, turning the card right-side-up and eyeing the words. She should've never doubted Joe, not even for a second. He was one of their closest family friends, exclusively in this small town where their name was now infamous. "You should do this...*especially* if it's something you love," she pointed determinedly at the card, though her voice wavered a bit.

Jonathan could still see the deep lines of worry on her face...but for once he couldn't distinguish their source. "Mom...it's gonna be okay," he offered in a calming voice. "We're gonna be okay." Joyce nodded, biting her lip and gripping his forearm steadily. She couldn't name this thing that seemed to float about her...this looming cloud of dread. All she knew was that it kept whispering on a drafty wind that all was not well...that they *wouldn't* be okay. Whether she knew it then, it was an inkling of times to come. She hadn't seen Hop at all today, and had tried calling him all morning to no avail. Something hadn't settled to the bottom of the river, and it was steadily dragging them downstream, into choppy waters. They sat a moment more, holding each other and gazing about their quiet house, noting the deafening stillness and remembering that the two youngest were not home right now.

The clock read four thirty-five. Eleven peered out the window, noting the afternoon colors separating early dawn from late day. Lucas and Mike had just gone into Mike's garage to find Ted's baseball while Dustin and Will sat in the basement with her, eerily silent. Will finally spoke up, "...so...you had a lion too?" El turned, realizing the question had been directed at her. She nodded. "Cool! What was his name?"

Her eyes flitted to the floor a second, her lips closed and her brow raising an indeterminable height. "...Leo..."

"What color was he?" Will asked as Dustin munched on one of the last Nilla wafers. He offered her the last cookie, and she took it gratefully.

"...orange..." she spoke, trying to blink back the flashbacks and focus on the wonderful present. *Why did this matter?* She swallowed a nervous pit in her throat, inhaling the scent of the Wheelers' basement like it was the last time she'd smell it. Then she chewed the wafer.

Will nodded knowingly, "Cool..."

"I never had stuffed animals...only action figures and dinosaurs," Dustin announced in a slightly boastful manner. Will chuckled at this, eyeing him quizzically. "...and comic books...which reminds me, YOU still need to return my X-Men One-Thirty-Four," he pointed, brow raising.

"I left it at home..." he sighed, shrugging playfully.

Dustin squinted at him, "Yeah...I bet you did..." Eleven looked off to the garage, wondering what was taking Mike so long.

"Hey man, I uh...I gotta talk to you," Lucas tapped his shoulder, pursing his lips nervously. Mike rose from a crouched position, wiping the dust on his pants and eyeing him expectantly.

"...okay," he nodded. They stood for a moment as Lucas bit his lip.

He suddenly shook his head, his eyes finding the baseball and snatching it from a box, "...you know what, forget it."

"**What?!** No fair, you did that last time!"

"Last time?" Lucas eyed him.

"Yeah! Remember? You were gonna tell me something and then you did *exactly* what you're doing now! Just **tell me** Lucas!" Mike demanded, fed up with this juvenile secrecy. He wanted to know whether it was about Dustin and quench his famished interest.

"Ugh...it doesn't even matter now! It's just..." Mike eyed him suspiciously. Very few times had he ever seen his friend tongue-tied. Lucas was a very opinionated, outspoken youth. He cursed more than *any* of them and was not afraid to do so in the company of adults... unless of course they were *his own* parents. So, what was holding him back now? Finally, he stopped pacing about and refocused his drive, "Okay! Last year, you kept calling Eleven on the radio." *Oh God.* Mike's eyes widened with fright. *How did he know that?!* "You were on the wrong station and I could hear...pretty much everything."

"...you **could**?" Mike asked, a little horrified. Lucas nodded, pursing his lips and lowering his gaze. Mike's pride instantly shattered into a million pieces. He'd only done it to find Eleven. *How dare he listen in!* "You didn't even tell me!?" Mike exclaimed, his voice pitching in anger.

"Look, I only listened to the first few messages, I *swear*!" Lucas vowed, slicing the air with his hand. "Even if I was gonna say anything, I didn't know how to just *cut* in!" Lucas remembered the first time it happened, at eleven o'clock sharp. At first he thought Mike had been radioing him personally, but then he recognized that distinct, soft tone he adopted whenever he spoke to her, even now. Lucas had quickly gathered he was eavesdropping on something extremely private, something that wasn't meant for his ears. Mike remembered too; he remembered standing by the basement door, peering through the window and holding the super-comm to his lips, asking...*begging* for her to come home and be okay again. All those messages she'd never received...and Lucas knew.

"Fine! So what? Are you gonna make fun of me now?!" Mike demanded, entirely riled up and distraught. If he were any more embarrassed or upset, his eyes would water. Right now, his face was flush and his ears were beet red.

"No! I wanted to tell you! I couldn't just **pretend** it didn't happen, 'cuz it did!" Lucas barked back. It had been festering within him for a while, and it always flared up whenever Mike smiled unabashedly at her or used that soft-spoken tone. This was something he'd needed to get off his chest. "I'm sorry..." he trailed off, shaking his head. Mike suddenly realized Lucas wasn't out to tease him or hold this over his head...he truly felt bad for the agony he'd heard in Mike's words. "I

should've told you sooner...but then Dustin kept showing up and...I never got the chance..."

"Why didn't you just use your super-comm?" Mike asked, his anger slightly smothered, though readily present.

"I didn't wanna risk anything...plus, I kinda expected you to freak out like this so I wanted to do it in person...in case you ended up hating me or...whatever..." Lucas sighed, clenching the baseball in his palm and eyeing the corner.

Mike eyed the floor while Lucas bated his breath, watching him out of the corner of his eye for any angrier expressions, hoping he could predict another outburst. If Mike and he were still friends after this, he wanted to get better at that sort of thing. After a long, patient moment, Mike sighed, rolling his eyes. "I'm not gonna hate you..." Lucas exhaled – he'd been holding his breath – and smiled when suddenly Mike spoke up again. "But you *can't* tell **anyone!** Not even Will, okay?"

Lucas turned his open palms towards him in a non-threatening manner, "Okay!"

"Okay...good..." Mike pursed his lips, looking off to the side bashfully.

That was when Lucas grinned, "...but Mike...did you guys really... kiss?"

Mike's glance shot back up, his face open with shock, "NO! No way!" Lucas' expression shifted to one of actual surprise, his eyes broadening as a devious smile crossed his face. "What?!"

Lucas shrugged, able to easily read Mike's fallacies for what they were and chuckling, "I was...*kidding!*" Mike knew this; they were too close to be able to lie well to each other. A nervous bundle clogged his throat and he swallowed it down, frustrated. "Ooh, Mike has a *crush!*"

"Stop! We didn't kiss! So shut up!"

Lucas laughed helplessly, "Aw come on man! I know you like her but



she's still a weirdo! She could've accidentally ripped your head off or something!"

"Cut it out!" Mike exclaimed, shoving Lucas' teasing arm away with haste. His friend couldn't stop giggling whenever he got a rise out of him. "Can we **not** talk about this right now?! We still don't know what's wrong with Will and I *think* that's more important!"

"Yeah yeah okay..." he sighed, wiping a fake tear from his eye. "I'm done..."

"Good. Let's just...forget it ever happened and get back to the others..." Mike led the way while Lucas discreetly chortled behind him, tossing the ball between his hands.

He then promptly mimicked Mike's lovey-dovey voice, tugging at his arm, "Oh El...*please* come back! El! El I miss you *so much*..."

"Shut up!" Mike shrugged his arm away as Lucas snickered jeeringly. *He was lucky they were good friends...* and Mike thought it better to soothe rather than fight about it, confident he would get Lucas back for this one way or another. When they reentered the basement, Dustin and Will were joking about something by themselves. Mike scanned the room, his eyes landing on the couch, "Where's El?"

"Oh, she went upstairs with Nancy," Dustin gestured as Will caught his breath, recovering from his outburst of laughter. Lucas grinned just from looking at him, but he swore to himself he wouldn't tell on Mike...it would be defacing the code they'd followed so honorably all these years.

"Oh..." Mike mused, climbing the stairs. He found her in the living room, seated beside Nancy on a tiny wooden bench.

"...go ahead and try it," Nancy offered, smiling at her excitedly. El caught his eye and the pit in his throat returned, watching her offer him a tiny smile. Then, she extended her hand, hovering it above the ivory and pressed a random key. The piano hummed with a single note and Eleven immediately removed her finger, blinking rapidly at the new noise. "That's an F...I think," Nancy explained.

"...an F?" El repeated, gazing at the rest of the white keys.

"It's a music note...each of these is a different note. It goes from A..." Nancy played an A, "...to a G." Her finger pressed into the G key as Eleven blinked at this new information, seemingly absorbing it into the storage's of her brain. El gingerly held her finger over the B key, seemingly nervous to push it down. "...go ahead," Nancy encouraged her. Pursing her lips, El pressed the key down with a slight nod of her head, smiling at the change in tone.

"...an F?"

"No, that's a B," Nancy gently took her hand and guided her small fingers to the F key. "This is an F," she pressed one onto the white, and El took this in. El smiled at Nancy, entirely engrossed in the intricacies of this large instrument. Mike had been watching from the corner, but his leg was jiggling anxiously.

When he felt he could jump ten thousand feet into the air, he dragged a stool into the room and sat down beside Eleven. "Oh! Play her a song!"

"I was just thinking of that..." Nancy nodded, fishing about the messy files for sheet music.

"What is...song?" Eleven asked.

Mike inhaled, "Its...uh...well its..."

Nancy rolled her eyes at this adorable interaction, turning and cutting in with, "It's a piece of music."

"Mu-sic?" the girl repeated.

"Yeah!" Mike nodded, eagerly shifting about in his seat. Just watching him, El had a feeling she was going to like music, *a lot*.

Now...there were only a few songs Nancy had in her arsenal, and even fewer that she had under her fingers. She was no music major, she merely dabbled in this form of fine arts...but she was neither mediocre. Nancy was – to describe her talent with the piano – above average when it came to people who could read basic music. So,

without thinking about the majors or minors, she pulled Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* from a folder and spread it before them. El's eyed widened at the hundreds of tiny black notes and the staves, raking over it with those brown orbs. "I think I can play this one..." was all Nancy said before she positioned her fingers over the keys, and began going through that first measure. El's smile vanished. Nancy was going quite slow – probably around sixty beats per minute – and each chord struck a note with Eleven that moved her in fresh, unexpected ways. Mike's smile slowly disintegrated, subconsciously noting the overpoweringly minor key and eyeing Eleven. She appeared frozen with thought, her eyes locking on the grains of the wooden piano and her lips slightly parted. Never before had she heard something so beautiful...it was as if a thousand birds were chirping at once, except their voices could sustain themselves longer than a single second, moving together seamlessly. The melodious work that was the *Moonlight Sonata* chanced Eleven as breathtaking...but so heartbreakingly blue.

Downstairs, the boys heard the opus echo about the house and lifted their gazes to the ceiling. "What is that?" Dustin asked, his face contorting into a lighthearted sneer.

"Ugh, I *hate* this song..." Lucas droned, shaking his head and rolling his eyes. Will listened closer, wondering what was happening up there.

Nancy messed up around the twenty-third measure, "Ugh...yeah it's-" She turned and was shocked into silence to find El barely fighting back tears. Mike had cupped his chin into his palm and gazed off into the carpet. "Oh no...I'm so sorry!" Nancy apologized. Mike's head shot up, immediately recognizing El's distressed face, brow knit in the center and chin trembling.

"Why'd you have to pick *that* song?!" Mike eyed her incredulously.

"I-I couldn't remember how it went..." Nancy shuffled the papers back into their folder.

Mike rolled his eyes, gripping El's hand and grabbing her attention. "Don't worry. Not *all* music is like *that*." He shot Nancy a nasty look as she returned it from over El's shoulder.

"...but why?" Eleven asked, looking down and feeling very uneasy about herself.

"...why what?" Mike asked.

"It's sad..." she gasped, fighting back her tears. "Why?" Nancy turned to toss a worried glance Mike's way, watching as his gaze deepened.

"Some music is...just like that," he offered his best explanation. El's gaze lowered ashamedly, feeling as if it was *her* fault. She thought she hadn't been listening to it correctly, as if it were some radio frequency she had to tap into...it wasn't. This was music...something El had never heard before. The last thing Mike wanted was for her to have a bad impression.

Nancy pursed her lips, establishing her words for a moment. "It's how they put the notes together...it makes it sound sad...but, it's *supposed* to make you feel that way." El frowned at this, slightly deterred. *What a horrible way to make people feel!*

"But that's okay! It's just...music," Mike reinstated. "There are better songs out there."

"...there are?" she asked, blinking back the waterworks.

"Yeah!" Mike confirmed, eyeing his sister expectantly. "Nancy! Play something *happy*," he said more than asked.

"O-Okay..." she pursed her lips as the two children eyed her keenly. Nancy had to think a moment...and almost naturally, she found her fingers moving to those old locations. Just their placements made her heart swell and she inhaled deeply, Mike shooting her a suspicious look. Then – grimacing a bit, as if she were ripping off a Band-Aid – Nancy began playing a bouncy little tune called *Heart and Soul* at an agreeable tempo that made the chords swing joyfully while giving each note its time in the spotlight. Mike watched a tiny smile creep onto El's face, her very expression brightening at the sounds, her tears far behind her. She eyed Mike playfully, and he thought he could see the beginnings of a chuckle on her lips.

He grinned alongside her, "See? It's fun!" They playfully bounced

their shoulders against each other as Mike beamed with glee. Eleven was overjoyed, convinced this *music* couldn't get any better the moment Nancy made it to the first repeat; then El got to enjoy it all over again. She scrutinized Nancy's constantly moving fingers, one hand repeating the same endless mantra while the other danced about the top keys, playing out a delicate little melody. *She must be the best at music*, Eleven thought, gazing up to offer a warm smile. It disappeared within a second when she saw Nancy's brow, knit in a pained expression of sorrow and loss. *What?!* Was El supposed to be feeling the way Nancy was right now?! *What is wrong with me*, Eleven thought. Mike seemed oblivious, humming the tune to himself in funny little voices, so she tapped his forearm "Doo doo doo...huh?" He glanced at Nancy, whose fingers froze on the third repeat line, effectually cutting the music off and replacing the wonderful sounds with impressive silence. El and he were confounded as Nancy shook her head, closing her eyes against something horrible pitted within her. Eleven knew that look all too well; she'd felt it on her own face and could recognize where it contorted with sadness.

"...Nancy?" El asked in a tiny voice.

"...yeah?" Nancy croaked, resting her elbow on the pencil trough and covering her mouth with a fist. El was about to ask what was wrong when Nancy got up from her seat, "I'm sorry...I need to be alone for a while..."

This perturbed Eleven...to an extreme. Rarely in her life had she been so distraught that she'd wanted to be alone. She'd only ever purposefully isolated herself when it came to the safety of others. But the music the girl had just played had been joyous and quite pleasant to the ear. *How could Nancy be feeling this way?!* "Oh..." Mike trailed off. "...o-okay." El eyed him sternly, this rebuke of a mien noiselessly shocking him into a hush. Before she could say anything, Nancy was off to her room, seated on her bed and shaking her head, her lower lip pressured painfully between her teeth. *She couldn't even play that song anymore...would she ever be able to play it again?* The girl sighed, the tune now haunting her ears, *knowing* Barb and her could play it way better and way faster.

Mike took Nancy's seat, the whole interaction not seeming to bother him in the slightest. "Mike?"

"Yeah?" he asked, smiling, and slowly lowering the corners of his lips. She looked very serious.

"Nancy...is sad," she stressed. "Why?"

Mike sighed, "Well...that song means something to her...and it makes her remember things." Eleven's gaze turned downcast; she *completely* understood that feeling. If Nancy hadn't stopped where she had, Eleven was pretty sure the *Moonlight Sonata* would've lulled her into a nightmare.

"It's not happy?" El checked. It seemed normal to cry over the first piece, but the second had warmed her blood and made her want to laugh...how could it have made Nancy want to cry?

"...well, no. It is a happy song," he confirmed. "It's just...it makes her remember good times that...can't happen anymore..."

El pursed her lips in a knowing manner, remembering how lost she'd been in the trees and the Upside Down. Her memories were all that had driven her to escape and endure...they'd imbued her with strength and the will to live. "...Barb?" This was a complete guess, but apparently Lucas and her were on a role today.

Mike nodded, "...yeah. They used to play it together..."

El's eyes twinkled a bit at this, "...together?"

"-yeah! Like, Nancy would play the bottom and Barb would play the right..." he seemed to pick up on her eager gaze. "...*we* can play something together! Y-you know...if you want..."

"Yes," she nodded, smiling warmly his way.

"O-Okay! Great!" Mike turned to face the piano excitedly. This would be a great way to shift the mood, but he was suddenly faced with a completely new dilemma.

"...Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"...do you...know...?" she trailed off, eyeing the keys forebodingly, her hands resting useless in her lap.

"...not a clue..." he pursed his lips, shoulders drooping a bit. El mimicked his action, nodding along with him. "...that's okay! We can just...make our own song."

If anything could melt Eleven's cold, cold heart, it was this proposal. Her smile was thoughtful and calm, emanating peace and serenity. "Okay," she agreed, following his hands and hovering her fingers over the ebony. What shortly ensued was a mish-mosh of mangled chords and deafening dissonance. Occasionally – and I mean, once in a blue moon – they'd land on a set of notes that actually formed a chord and they'd look up at each other, their grins wild and buoyant. *This is progress*, they'd think to themselves. *We're almost there!* This went on for another five minutes until Mike got bored and began harshly slamming the highest keys down, their tenors screeching like baby kittens. El preferred the lower register, inwardly giggling whenever she played the lowest note, then stomping her way up to form her own jumbled rhythm. Neither of them were careful enough to memorize the location of those resonant chords; they were too excited with the crazy sounds jumping from the piano. El quickly learned that while music could be sad and happy...it could also be inescapably hilarious.

"Mike?" Both children stopped playing, yanking their fingers from the keys. Karen was peering into the room, eyeing her son glaringly. "Holly is trying to sleep..." she warned with a raise of her brow.

"O-Oh, sorry..." he stammered, watching as his mother nodded, then left the edge of the room. He turned back to peer at his friend, who was grinning childishly beside him, still enthralled with the discovery of this new music. Regretfully, Mike closed the key cover, motioning for Eleven to move her fingers out of the way. "Um...here! Let's go see what the guys are doing." El nodded eagerly at this, tailing his heels as he clambered down the stairs.

Hopper's boots crossed the threshold and into his workplace, and Flo immediately rose from her seat. "Jim...where have you been?"

He peered around the room at the officers, idle and mundane...but he

couldn't see Callahan or Powell. His throat dried up as one spot in his stomach hung heavy with glue. "It's a long story..." he began in a tired voice. "...Flo? Where are they?" he turned to eye her, a worried look plastered upon his face. Flo shook her head, closing her eyes regretfully. This wasn't like her, this was *nothing* like the woman who always provided snappy answers and prompt patient reports. "Flo?!"

"...Cal's been shot...he and Powell are at Hawkins General awaiting a blood transfusion," Flo shook her head, having already gone through Cal's personal effects and files in an attempt to mitigate her fears. She didn't really know why she'd done it, as if seeing his date of birth and signature laid to rest along a dotted line was going to make her feel any better when deep down she *knew* none of this perusing would ever matter.

But Hop's face changed, like a flicker of something ignited just behind those tired blue eyes. "Flo, what's his blood type?"

Flo's brow creased behind those enormous spectacles in a curious way. "Unfortunately...he's O negative." A small glimmer of hope sparked between them. "Why? Are you...?"

"No...I can't, I'm A negative..." Hop began violently fishing in his pocket for those stolen records, extracting and unfolding her medical files. He didn't know why he was doing this...as if he could actually pull it off or if it could even be done. As Flo leaned in curiously, the Chief turned away from her, tearing the paper from her view and boring holes into the one spot his eyes stared. A bold-printed **O** sat, a minus sign dangling precariously beside the letter. Those words behind the blood type haunted him, and he noticed that they too were in bold printing. **Universal donor**. He looked pale...*ghastly* pale...yet his eyes were alight with fire. "...but I think I know someone who can."

"Hop...what is that?" Flo leaned over her counter a second time to try and see.

"Flo I've gotta go. Hold down the fort while I'm gone..." he mumbled, tucking the paper into his pocket and nearly striding through the door.



"Jim, wait!" she circled the counter, latching onto his shoulder and pulling him round to face her. "This isn't *like* you, Jim. I can tell you haven't been sleeping. When's the last time you ate anything?" *Here we go...* he thought. Flo was their secretary...but she was also nearly every officer's second mother whenever they came to fill a shift. "What's going on?"

"I..." he shook his head, grabbing her small hands in his and holding them between the two in a promising gesture. "Look, Flo...I will tell you everything *later*. Right now I need to get to the hospital. But I will tell you-"

"Is that the Chief?!" a piercing voice cut through the room as Cynthia stormed towards them.

Flo peered over her shoulder at the delusional dame and muttered, "Good lord..." She turned back to him and whispered, "You better get out of here while you can. She's being helped; she wants to take it out on your hide."

Hop nearly laughed at this, then frowned and asked, "Yes...ma'am-"

"This is *ridiculous*! Do you **know** how long I've been waiting?!"

"Ma'am, PLEASE. Lower your voice. What's the problem?"

Cynthia eyed Flo a moment before exclaiming, "Well it's my Lonnie! He didn't come home this morning! Not a call, not one message...!"

If Hop hadn't seen Lonnie mere hours ago, he would've offered a simple reply, something along the lines of...*well he's probably still waking up somewhere, piss drunk*. But Hop knew better, and his expression did nothing to conceal this fact. "Flo...?"

She nodded, turning to the young damsel, "Miss, you're going to have to wait until the Chief gets back if you want to speak with him directly. He needs-"

"***Are you serious right now?!***" She glared at him as Hop exited the building, blinking at the glaring sunlight. It was past noon...Cal was running out of time. "Is he just gonna walk out like-"

"MA'AM! One of his officers is *dying!* He's going to donate his blood to him. Now PLEASE, take a seat!" The deputy who had accidentally let Cynthia escape his attention stood behind her, clutching a file and giving Flo a look of deep concern.

The girl seemed to calm down at this, "...*fine.*" They walked back to a desk in the main room as Flo rubbed her temples, wishing Hop had told her what was troubling him so...besides Callahan's injury, of course. At a young age, curiosity was something to behold...but for Flo, who had piles of paperwork and patients to file, it plagued her like an ailment, incessantly nagging at her already occupied thoughts.

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: Okay, now THIS chapter gets the longest chapter award (so far)! I was actually smiling to myself while writing the piano scene...they're just so adorable together. UGH...the feels man.

Lucas is such a butt oh my god...

Flo needs more appreciation for being a boss in life and keeping it real.

Oh and YOU GUYS! Thank you so much for the support and the compliments. It means A LOT. I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter, and if you did, follow for more to come. Tell me what you thought, constructive criticism included! And thank you again for reading! Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*

## 25. The Artist and the Astronaut

### Chapter Twenty-Five – The Artist and the Astronaut

"Mom...are you gonna eat?" Jonathan fussed over the dinner table like a stylist, setting the plates and silverware in their correct positions. With a spin of his heels he was facing the skillet again, flipping the pan-seared sausage links onto their paler sides. He took a pinch of spices and sprinkled it onto the meat, stirring the peppers and onions about in the pan and inhaling the delicious aroma. *Hopefully it tastes as good as it smells*, Jonathan thought.

"Yeah yeah just...give me a minute," she stammered. Jonathan peeked at her from over his shoulder. She was standing by the phone again, arms crossed and heel tapping the carpet, awaiting an automated voicemail. He could hear the beep from where he stood, ringing out over the sizzling meat and juices. Joyce sighed deeply, "Hopper, this is the *sixteenth* time I've called. *Please* just...c-call me back as *soon* as you can..." With another frustrated sigh, she shook her head and placed the phone into the receiver. It wasn't quite a slam...it lay somewhere in-between impoliteness and courtesy...and it still managed to make Jonathan flinch.

"Mom...I'm sure everything's fine. You explained things as best you could," Jonathan consoled.

"No...no it's not that...I'm not worried about her...I *know* she's okay..." she breathed into the back of her palm. Her son eyed her from the stove, his brow lowering with concern. "...I'm worried about Hop," she admitted with a helpless shrug.

"...a-about Hop?" he repeated incredulously. The boy scoffed good-naturedly, "Why? He's the Chief...and even if he wasn't-"

"I know Jonathan...I *know*..." she trailed off, sitting down to their cozy table. He went about scooping the still steaming food from the pan and onto a serving plate, grabbing a pair of tongs and offering them to his mother. As he set the dish onto the middle of the table, she returned a tired smile, taking the utensils gratefully. "I-It's just... he knows more than *any* of us."

Her son eyed her a moment, "You mean...about her?" Joyce nodded.

"Yes...and...I-I'm just worried something *happened* to him...I-I have this *feeling* Jonathan," she pressed her closed fist into the space below her collar bone, shaking her head worriedly. Her son regarded her in a different way now, like how he had before he'd realized Will wasn't dead and his mother wasn't crazy. Joyce eyed him, immediately recognizing that **look** and *loathing* it. To Jonathan, everything was alright. "I...I-I just wanna know if he's *okay* or-"

Hasty knuckles pounded against the Byers' front door, lurching them from their conversation. Joyce rushed to her feet, striding across the den and throwing the door open. The sun was just setting behind the trees, and the man she'd been looking for all this time stood before her...his eyes baggy and grey. Jonathan nearly jumped from his seat, "...Mom?"

"Joyce...I need to, talk to you..." Hop beckoned her outside, into the freezing cold.

"Where have you been?! I've been calling *all morning!*" she exclaimed, emoting with her arms held before her. "I-I've been worried sick!" Jonathan abandoned the dinner table and the fragrant piles of food, moving to stand behind her in the doorway.

"Joyce..." he sighed, looking like he was about to insist something but appearing to not have the energy for it. A drafty wind carried the scent of peppers and sausages towards him and his stomach roared quite audibly. "...I wasn't home." This wasn't news to her; she'd figured as much. She needed to question him further, afraid of what he would eventually answer...but absolutely *needing* to know.

"...I-I called the station! Flo said you weren't in...that you hadn't come in at *all*," she stressed. His eyes were half-lidded, his lips seemingly molded into a deep-set frown. Poignant exhaustion simply emanated from his very presence. Jonathan noticed this, taking a mental note as to how this *profoundly* affected his mother, who empathized with him by *sharing* his grief and doubt...though she hadn't even learnt its source! Joyce could take a few guesses as to what it was though...

"...you can come in if you want. We just made dinner," Jonathan spoke up. Both adults lifted their gazes towards him, having been seemingly lost in each other's eyes. *They do that way too much*, Jonathan told himself.

"...y-yeah. Come inside," Joyce beckoned him. Hopper stepped into their house reaching up to grasp at something on his head.

Suddenly, his eyes bolted open and he swore loudly, "DAMMIT!"

"W-WHAT?!" Jonathan nearly shouted, his mother eyeing Hopper suspiciously. The man spun about to face the open door, clutching the wooden frame angrily.

"...they took my *hat*..." he seethed with fury, grimacing into the twilight. He realized he must've left it in the car...and just thinking about that man with his grey suit and his synthetic smile irked him beyond belief. Hop felt a part of him was being held hostage, never to be recovered unless he followed through with their stomach-turning deal. Of course, there would be *many more* horrible repercussions if he refused to cooperate. In hindsight...the hat was nothing to be worried about. He looked back at them, wondering if they could handle this new information. They stared back expectantly. Hopper was an adult and an even more experienced police officer, *easily* able to make this decision on his own and *throw* Eleven's new life away at the drop of a word. This epiphany wouldn't strike Hopper now – not now and not for many days – but there *were* in fact some things he could learn from the younger ones; the kids. Loyalty, honesty...*openness*. Right now, Hop felt like a cracked shell, barely enclosing some very venomous secrets and nothing else. His heart felt empty, asphyxiated of any kind of positive emotion or thought.

"...w-who took your hat?" Joyce asked in a quavering voice, sympathizing with him at every angle of her face. The hat meant a lot to him; it had belonged to his grandfather and been passed down to him through his bloodline. Never had he told *anyone* this besides Sarah...but Joyce read him well enough to perceive how highly he adored the unassuming accessory. She'd figured it meant a lot to him the moment she'd seen him wear it.

He eyed them, a chorus of fear and doubt screaming over his thoughts until he finally silenced them into a long-awaited hiatus. "... Dr. Brenner...those troopers from Hawkins Lab..." Jonathan's eyebrows raised in disbelief, his emotions mixing well with his biding panic. Joyce – on an entirely different spectrum – appeared furious.

"...Hop?"

"It's..." he breathed, knowing these next few moments were crucial. "...it's a long story." They all stood in silence for a moment, staring at each other as if they were different species meeting for the first time, separated along evolutionary paths, utterly alienated and foreign.

Joyce suddenly swirled about, eyeing the kitchen table. "We can talk over dinner..."

This offer was met with an unexpected sigh of polite rebuttal, the likes of which Joyce would have *no* part in. "No, Joyce...you don't have to-"

"-Hop..." she blurted out, holding in her exasperation. "...Hop, eat something! You look..." she gestured wildly to his sweat-stained uniform, his slackened skin and his tired eyes. Even his shoulders sank beneath the mass of a thousand enigmas.

"-like shit?" he cut in. Joyce scoffed, rubbing her temple.

"...not much better..." Jonathan added, earning a warning leer from his mother and a tired glance from the Chief. He lowered his gaze, peering up at Hop beneath the curve of his brow. The man pursed his lips.

"...alright Joyce..." he agreed, closing the door behind him on the fading sunset. As he crossed the room – knowing this would be the time to remove his missing hat with a polite hand – Joyce swooped behind him, locking and chaining the door. "I just wanna let you know...you're not gonna like what you hear." He seemed to drag himself to the table as Jonathan set a chair for him and began plating some food. Hop inhaled the delectable smells, "...what'd you guys make?"

The boy eyed him surprisingly, "O-Oh...um...peppers and sausage..."

"...smells good," Hop complimented in a monotone bass. Joyce sat beside him, no longer interested in her food when it was *all* Hop could stare at.

"...t-thanks," Jonathan grabbed a fork and knife from the silverware drawer. "Here you go," he set a plate before him and Hop nodded in thanks, cutting into the largest link and bringing a piece to his lips. They watched him eat for a little while longer, Jonathan trying to ignore his ravenous hunger while Joyce was overwhelmingly fascinated.

"...when's the last time, y-you **ate**?" she eyed him wondrously, grinning a bit.

"Mm..." he made a little noise of remembrance past a mouthful of food, reaching for a glass of water. It was Jonathan's, but the boy only pursed his lips discreetly, standing back up to pour himself another. "...yesterday morning," he echoed into the cup, gulping down the fresh, clean water. The Byers eyed each other as if to say, *no wonder he's so damn famished*. In record time, Hopper finished the meal, even taking the time to hunt down those pesky thin pepper strips and stab them with the fork. He swallowed, sighing and leaning back in his chair to rub his forehead. *Now he just needed to hibernate*. "...that was good," he complimented with an impressed nod. His eyes were on Jonathan.

"Thanks," the boy nodded.

"Has he always been able to cook like that?" Hop pointed to him with a thumb while looking at the mother, but his relaxed smile slowly vanished. Her glare was stern and glowering, as if she were challenging him to another one of their staring contests.

Hop sighed while she pressed, "Hop...tell us what happened."

Before saying anything, he pursed his lips and shook his head. Then he rested his forehead into the cup of his palm. Jonathan was *very* deterred to see him this way. This was one of the men he'd chosen to idolize now...broken and weary before him. Something was horribly

wrong...his gut told him so. Neither mother nor son touched their plates, the food now sitting lukewarm and forgotten. They wouldn't touch them for the rest of the night. "Joyce..." Hop suddenly brought his face from his hand, his eyes misty. Those blue, watery orbs met her demanding brown irises, clasping her hands in his own.

"-Hop." Joyce sounded anxious, like all he had to do was tear a bandage off and it'd all be better...but he knew it wasn't that simple. "Just *tell* me..." Seeing him like this dismayed Joyce, which in turn made Jonathan distraught. He too was eagerly awaiting some kind of report...though with much bated apprehension.

"...we brought Lonnie in last night. When I got back to the station around..." he sighed, rubbing his lips with the corner of his hand. "...God it must've been...late night, early morning..." He distinctly remembered watching the sunrise with that viperous man. Joyce and his son watched intently. "He wasn't there..."

Joyce eyed him suspiciously, "...h-how...?"

"They..." Hop bit his lip, shaking his head and looking away for a moment. Because he knew this would crush her. The most Hop had gathered from stories of their courtship was that Lonnie and Joyce had a **major** falling out...but that inevitably meant they'd been invested in each other at some time. They might've even been in love...

"Hop..." Joyce pleaded, giving his hands a shake.

He turned back to eye her, "...they took jurisdiction over the case... lied and said he was part of some big conspiracy..." Joyce's eyelids fluttered in confusion. "...they took him Joyce. They *killed* him."

The Wheelers' house was *bustling* with energy. Karen and Ted lay beneath their covers, two floors separating them and the rambunctious children...and nevertheless, they could **still** hear them. "Ted..." Karen sighed into a heated exhale. He didn't respond, so she hissed, "...**Ted!**"

"...hm?" he hummed, easily drifting off to sleep above the muffled noise. More laughter seeped through the floorboards with



lighthearted intent. It was only an incessant racket for those who were trying to sleep.

"They are being *too loud* Ted," Karen insisted.

"Mmm...let them have fun..." Ted groaned, turning onto his side so he could face her. "It's not a school night..." She watched his bare eyes slowly close and she shoved him with her ankle. He growled disagreeably.

"But Ted...what about the *girl?!'*" Karen hissed. His eyes snapped open. "Joyce called and said she would be back to pick her up before eight. It's *nine*," she stressed each word.

"Oh!" Ted sat up, rubbing his eyes and letting his furry legs dangle over the side of the bed. He yawned with a stretch of his arms, "For a second I forgot one of them wasn't a boy..."

Karen rolled her eyes, "Oh Ted..." She rubbed her forehead, lazing back into the pillows. He lazily brought his spectacles to his eyes, blinking as his perspectives changed. His wife droned, "...where is she gonna *sleep?*"

"Well...in the basement I assume," Ted suggested quite simply. "The boys will sleep in Mike's room, like last time."

"Oh..." she blinked at this suggestion. "...that'll work."

"Mm-hm," Ted rose to his feet, stretching his toes a bit and exiting the room. Karen rolled over onto her side, trying to find some semblance of sleep amidst the never-ending laughter.

"Okay...ready?" Mike prepped, eyeing his ticking watch. They all nodded, smiling deviously at one another. "One...two...three!" Everyone flipped their papers around, presenting their *masterpieces* to Dustin. He eyed them all, discerning which one sat best with him.

"Hm..." he puzzled like an investigator, rubbing his chin and squinting his eyes. Mike drew a roundish face balancing a bale of hay on top of it...at least it *looked* that way. Eleven drew another stick person with eyes of blue and crazed spikes of hair sticking out from their skull. Will's was obviously the best: it looked the most like

Dustin's D&D persona than it did his actual appearance. He'd even taken the time to color in his shoes and draw a half-eaten apple in his hand. Then Dustin saw Lucas' and shot him a glare, "HEY!"

"W-What?!" Lucas giggled as Mike concealed his snicker. El blinked at the picture as Will eyed Lucas' caricature giddily, his cheeks enormously large and his iconic hat *way* too big. He had a manic grin on his face, and Lucas had drawn in black spaces where his teeth were missing. "It's a *compliment*! That's supposed to be your big brain under there," Lucas pointed to the over-sized hat with a crayon. As they all peered around at each other's work, they began laughing and pointing to the tiny details the artists had added. El's were always the simplest, mostly composed of straight lines and missing noses. When they'd drawn El, Lucas hadn't even *given* her hair. Mike had etched in long blonde locks while Dustin had tinted her eyes red with tiny lines of blood leaking from her nose. They'd all found a way to laugh at each other though, even El didn't seem offended in the least. And they always had compliments for Will, who was winning this game by leaps and bounds.

"...I gotta go with Will the Wise on this one," Dustin pointed. Mike and Lucas groaned in unison while Will openly cheered.

"Man...why even play this game if *you're* gonna be the only winner?!" Lucas questioned in an incredulous tone.

"Why do you think I suggested it?" the wizard asked with a knowing grin.

Dustin snickered, "He *does* have a point. He's basically playing *us* at this point." Lucas rolled his eyes, unable to refuse the slight curl of his lips. Mike and Dustin were peering at the nearly empty pizza box, eyeing each other over their smirks.

"...you can have it," Mike offered.

"Thanks!" the boy smiled, reaching for the box and grabbing the slice. "You wanna split it?"

"Na, I'm stuffed..." Mike shook his head, holding in a burp with a closed fist. He didn't want El to think he was gross.

"You want a piece?" Dustin offered the girl. She thought about it, partially stunned to realize that for the first time in a *long* time – besides this morning at breakfast – she didn't feel hungry. With a smile, she shook her head, watching Mike as he rose to his feet. Dustin shrugged, "Suit yourself!"

"I'm just gonna take this outside so my mom doesn't yell at me..." Mike announced, grabbing the discarded box.

"Cool," Lucas replied, starting a game of tic-tac-toe with Will. While El wanted very much to watch them play out this fun new game, she followed Mike outside, much to the boys' surprise. They watched her walk out, glancing at each other wordlessly. Then Lucas broke into a huge grin and began snickering, covering his mouth with a hand. Dustin chuckled too, though Will seemed rather lost.

"...what?" he spoke.

"...oh...it's nothing..." Lucas chuckled, shaking his head.

"...you'll figure it out," Dustin tapped him assuredly on the shoulder.

The driveway was frigid beneath his bare feet and his loins trembled in the cold, night air. With the door to his back, he bent the box over itself multiple times, trying to fit it into the trash can. "...Mike?"

He gasped, spinning around and looking over his shoulder. "Oh! Hey El!" They exchanged a smile as her eyes drifted to the can. "...I'm just, taking out the trash..." he sighed. "It's one of my chores..."

"Chores?" El repeated, her brow slightly raising.

"Oh...they're these things we're supposed to do. Dad says it keeps the house from falling apart...I guess he's kind of right..." El tilted her head at this and Mike lowered his head bashfully. "It's like a...a tiny job."

El nodded, peering off to the side and yawning deeply. *She wondered if her chores had been to crush soda cans and listen to strangers who spoke in foreign tongues. That would explain a lot.* Mike finished stuffing the cardboard inside, bending down to return the lid to the can. "...hey Mike?"

"Yeah?"

For some odd reason, she felt her cheeks flush red at the way he gazed up at her, entirely engaged in her short, simple words. She drew in a breath, suddenly nervous and blinking quickly. This showed on her face, and for a moment, Mike thought something was wrong. "...can I show you something?"

"...sure! What is it?"

She pursed her lips, walking away from him and out from beneath his overhang of a garage. Even more perplexed, Mike followed his friend until they stood on the grassy knoll just behind his house. The door to the basement sat directly behind them. She was gazing up at the stars, turning to smile at him. "Look," she pointed. He did, smiling up at the trillions of balls of gas. Then he looked back at her.

"You like to stargaze?" he asked, seemingly surprised. She eyed him a moment, "Oh...it's when you look at the stars...those tiny balls of light up there." He motioned with a hand and she smiled, nodding beside him. That was when he broke into the biggest of smiles, "-cool! Me too!" Eleven copied his expression, her eyes dark in the glistening moonlight.

"...together?" she asked.

"Um..." he turned back to the basement door a moment, pursing his lips. "...okay! I guess we can watch them for a little while." El smiled at this, happily sitting on the grass beside Mike. He laid flat on his back, looking *straight out* into the atmosphere. *What a brilliant idea*, Eleven thought, copying him once again. They were side-by-side, gazing up at the stars like novice astronomers. She could hear him yawn, his voice pitching near the end in a hilarious manner, and seconds later, she was yawning too. *That was weird...* she thought. Her hands splayed into the earth beside her, pressing down onto the grass. "So, my parents are probably gonna want you to sleep in the basement by yourself tonight..."

She turned to look at him, her ear bristled by the grass, "Why?"

"Well...the guys are gonna sleep in my room...but, you have to sleep

somewhere else." Her absent gaze illustrated that he hadn't answered her question. "It's because...you're a girl. Guys and girls aren't supposed to have sleep-overs together...at least, not in the same room."

"...no?" she asked, her curiosity piqued.

Mike sighed hopelessly, a bitter wind passing over them. "Well, yeah...that's just the rules...it'd be weird." She pursed her lips. It wasn't like she wasn't used to it...she had simply missed them all so much. "Don't worry. I'll make sure you have enough blankets. Sometimes it gets really cold in there..." She nodded understandably, knowing this fact to be true.

"...Mike?" her voice was soft and gentle, as always, but even *more* so than usual.

"Yeah?" he turned to face her, and now it was *his* turn to blush. She was giving him that look from last year, when she'd approached him in the bathroom. He froze, unable to move or speak or breathe. The sounds of the crickets and the night birds echoed over them as they maintained eye contact for what seemed an endless moment. Then he felt something cold touch his hand, as if whatever it was had to test the handles of a hot pan. He peeked down – just in case it wasn't her and some kind of creature – and noticed her left hand inching towards his right one. Mike simpered and opened his fingers as she wrapped hers around his palm, relishing in the warmth. *Her hands are freezing!* "...a-are you cold?" he croaked past a lump in his throat.

"No," she replied confidently, still holding that beaming stare with him. A whole new current of blood rushed into his cheeks and he swallowed his anxiety. He didn't *dare* look at the stars or break eye contact...her eyes were so intense and inquisitive. Out of all of them, Lucas and her were definitely the most animated individuals, their eyes truly acting as windows into their souls. Mike's thoughts skid to a halt. *Lucas...why was he thinking of Lucas?* Eleven gripped his hand tighter as a gust of wind tousled his hair. She wasn't smiling...and she wasn't frowning either, just holding that unbreakable gaze. *"She could've accidentally ripped your head off or something!"* Mike blinked. ***Stop! Why was he thinking of Lucas?!***

"Hey guys!" Dustin's voice shocked them out of a nameless moment, both of them sitting up and returning their hands to their respective bodies. The curly-haired boy squinted at them playfully, his grin large and wide. "Lucas wants to play Battleship..." he trailed off.

"Oh! O-Okay!" Mike hopped to his feet as Dustin kept that grin plastered on his face. El followed them inside, peering over her shoulder before closing the door, gazing up at the stars almost gratefully.

"I-I just can't believe they...t-they would *do* that!" Joyce gasped, wiping her tears with the edge of her hand. Jonathan had resigned himself to the edge of the couch with his mother on his left and on Hopper's right. Joyce had broken down the instant Hop had uttered the words...and to Jonathan's amazement, he hadn't. The teen only felt bad that he *couldn't* feel bad for him, and the only reason he was close to crying was because his mother sobbing. "I mean...Lonnie he-" she broke off into an exacerbated sigh. "H-He didn't do anything wrong! He wasn't in their way!"

"They're trying to scare us..." he sighed, gripping her one hand tighter. "...they just want her Joyce. They just kept saying it over and over...she's all they want."

"But Hop...a-are you sure?" Jonathan turned to eye his mother, entirely distressed, his face wet with tears as it contorted in terrible ways. Joyce stared at the Chief as he eyed her back. "There wasn't...any way for him to...to-"

"No...no Joyce he was gone..." Hop closed his eyes at the startlingly graphic memory. The way his skull just...disintegrated beneath the force of the bullet...how his life had been strewn across the back of his door like a splatter painting.

"B-But...what about CPR? D-Did you try that?" Joyce pressed. Hop shook his head, shutting his eyelids tight. "Oh *come on!* It worked for Will!"

Hop locked their gazes, his eyes exhausted and sad...but his face was immovably stern, "...he was *gone*." Joyce shook her head, biting back a million sobs and hugging her son close. "I'm sorry Joyce..." he

breathed, his eyes twinkling in the dim lighting. He knew time was short...that – unfortunately – he had to continue dishing out the bad news. Eleven was *not* his sole responsibility...he'd labeled Joyce as her mother days ago. He, under no circumstances, would make this decision by himself or without her permission. "While I was talking with Brenner...one of my officers got shot. Now, I don't know if it's an isolated incident or if it's all somehow related...all I know is that he lost a *lot* of blood...and he's O negative." Joyce eyed Hop incredulously. "...are either of you O negative?" To his dismay, they both shook their heads. He sighed through his nose, reaching in his pocket and fishing out her papers.

"W-What is that?" Joyce asked, squinting her eyes at the sheets.

"...before I left, I stole these from Brenner's jacket," he showed her the documentation. It was all here, restating the one true fact they'd accepted long before...that Eleven was Jane Ives. That she was a *person*.

"H-Hop...we could..." Joyce pointed promisingly at the birth certificate, her eyes widening at him. "...w-we could *do something* with this..."

"I know..." Hop sighed, trying to ignore the fact that they only had a week to devise some kind of strategy. "...Joyce...her blood type is O negative..." he pointed to the words **universal donor**. She eyed him incredulously, seemingly forgetting the correlation while Jonathan's expression opened up in shock.

"A-Are you sure that's a good idea?" he asked. Joyce's eyes widened as the association abruptly established itself. "How are we supposed to get her in the hospital?"

There was a thick silence that permeated the room, lasting only a moment as Hop pursed his lips. "...we lie," Hop stated in a monotone. They eyed him worriedly. "Make up a name for her, say she's Cal's niece or something...I don't think they'll care too much...they know he's dying."

Joyce broke in, "Hop this is *crazy*! W-What if someone from state is there?!"

"Yeah! And...w-what if she's sick with something?" Jonathan cut in. Now *that* caught Hop's attention. "How are they gonna make sure her blood's even clean?"

"Look, Brenner said they took care of her. They gave her food, medicine when she needed it-"

"How do you know he wasn't lying?!" Joyce rebuked. Hop eyed her, helplessness momentarily fogging his view.

"...I don't know..." he shook his head. "But...I'm pretty sure they test the blood before they let anyone receive it..." he added.

"She's not even *old* enough," Joyce remembered, resting an elbow on her knee and mashing the ball of her hand into her forehead.

"They *might* let it go," Hop shrugged in a hopeless gesture. "If we play on the family connection, and I mean *really* draw it out...they might let her-"

"Hop..." Joyce warned. "This is a little *girl* we're talking about! Eleven! Are you *insane*?!"

"Joyce..." Hop broke into a helpless breath. "...you remember when we found the fake body in the quarry?" he suddenly prompted out of nowhere. She scoffed at him while Jonathan deepened his gaze. "Cal was the *first* deputy on scene...he let the rest of us know. And you remember when Eleven went missing the *same* night we found Will?" Joyce nodded, pursing her lips in a painful gesture. "...he was there too. He was the *only* one who went inside...and he told me there were bodies everywhere..."

Joyce eyed him suspiciously, more than confused as to how this made anything better. "...w-what?"

"...I don't know if *she* killed them all or if it was that, *thing*...I don't know..." A tremor coursed through Jonathan's bones and he gripped her hand tighter, remembering the Demogorgon as easily as lyrics to his favorite song. "...but she is a *tough* girl. She lived through that winter...she can *do* this. *But* I'm not saying she *has* to. I'm leaving it up to her." Joyce scoffed, shaking her head and closing her eyes. "I



don't care if she says no...I'll find someone else who can donate...but I'm *going* to save him. He can't die like this. Not now...he's the *youngest* one on the force." Pained expressions were exchanged as Hop narrowed their options. "...I have to go..." Hop rose to his feet, his legs rebelling against the pressure with an achy soreness. For a moment, he stopped to stand in the center of the room, dreamlike. When he turned, he saw Joyce standing behind him, her brow creased frustratingly. "...is she here?"

Joyce shook her head, "...no. She's still at the Wheelers'..."

Hop eyed her, "You shouldn't come Joyce..."

A glimmer of something flashed behind her eyes, and it was something he'd never seen before, but he knew it was mixed with anger. "I'm going!" she stated affirmatively.

He shook his head, "No. They'll recognize you..." They'd just treated her sick son days ago, to no avail. Some of the doctors may still be puzzling over it...yes. *They would most assuredly remember her name.*

"Oh, and you don't think they'll recognize *you*?!"

"They *know* I'm looking for donors Joyce...they're gonna expect me..." he explained. She grimaced at him, shaking her head as the tears slipped down her face. His eyes were past watery...they were downright soaked. And she knew he was right. "I'm sorry...but I *can't* let him go out like this..."

Joyce shook her head, entirely discouraged at the thought of their tiny girl donating blood for a complete stranger. She bit her lip, eyeing him angrily for the first time in weeks. "...Hop...you, go there and you *ask* her. Tell her *everything*. Let her *know* what's going on. Be *patient* with her, and if she says no, *just*...drop her off here." She took a moment to sigh into her wrist, rubbing her forehead, "I was supposed to pick her up hours ago..."

"Sure Joyce..." he nodded, pursing his lips thoughtfully. "I'll tell her."

"...okay," her voice broke a bit. "Just...just be *careful* with her Hop...she's...she's just a kid."

"I know..." he sighed. "I'll make sure she has enough to eat afterwards..."

"Good...good..." she nodded, pursing her lips restlessly. They gazed into each other's eyes a moment more, as if Hop was waiting for some unspoken cue. Apparently he'd gotten it, and Jonathan watched him go, dumbfounded and uncompromising. The door closed behind him.

"You're just gonna let him do that?!" he blurted out the moment Hop was through the door.

"W-What?!" Joyce spun around at the noise, taking in her son's frustrated expression.

"You're right Mom, she is just a kid. But that *doesn't* mean she should make *all* her decisions on her own!" he stressed. "How could you let him go through with this?!"

"Jonathan, she'll be *fine*! I...I-I *know* it!" she shot back. Jonathan shook his head, disgusted. He retreated into his room, the slam of his door shaking the house. "Jonathan..." her voice trailed him as she shook her head. She felt like breaking down again, ready to crumble beneath the crushing weight of her stress. That's when she saw the table and their two plates of food...untouched and cold. She sighed, a hopelessness consuming her as she scooped the food into the trash, placing the dishes into the sink. Oddly enough, there was still some left in the pan. Joyce eyed it confusingly. *He'd saved her some food...* she nearly broke into a sob, plating the food and covering it with plastic wrap. This plate went into the fridge, safe and sound amidst the chilled air. She'd sleep on the couch tonight, waiting for them to return. Joyce couldn't help it...Hop had told them *everything*, and a new doubt began lurking in the shadows, taking control of her every thought and action. It was distrust...purely cautionary, but it made her sick to her stomach just by considering it.

"Boys?" Ted called down the stairs, eyeing the basement through sleepy eyes. The small bodies were strewn about the room, tucked within assorted blankets and pillows. Mike and Will were sleeping on the floor, Dustin was hogging the couch and Lucas had collapsed in the far corner, turned to face them all. He squinted, searching about for the girl until he eventually found her, tucked beneath the open

flap of Mike's fort, wrapped within his yellow sleeping bag. They breathed in a peaceful rhythm, soothing and calm, except for the occasional snore from Dustin. Ted pursed his lips, not having the heart to wake them up or separate them in any way. *This is alright*, he told himself. *Nothing wrong here*. He walked back up the stairs, gingerly shutting the basement door and returning to his room. The weight of his body sinking into the mattress alerted Karen to his presence. She turned to speak but he simply hushed her in a comforting tone, "I sent her to Nancy's room. They're all sleeping."

"...good..." she mumbled, still very much asleep. They lazed back into a now quiet slumber, Ted grinning to himself in the darkness.

Eleven's eyes snapped open. A shiver raked its icy claws over her, and she turned to spot Mike, sleeping closest to her tiny fort. A smile graced her lips as her eyes wandered over the rest of them. Will's blankets were empty and disheveled, and she noticed that the bathroom light was on. Her smile slowly disappeared, but rather than get up, she closed her eyes, inhaling deeply. Mike mumbled himself awake, blinking at the odd sight. For a split-second he was terrified. He hadn't expected Eleven to be leaning on her side, her eyes closed like she was using her powers. *Wait...what if she was?* "El?" he whispered, unable to snap her from her mantra. Eventually her eyes reopened with a slight sway of her head, her mouth parting in a frightened expression that made Mike's stomach drop. She crawled from beneath the fort, stepping over Mike and warily picking her way towards the bathroom. He sat up, eyeing her incredulously, "El...no... EL!" She turned back to glare at him. "I think Will's in there... remember? *Privacy?*" Dustin and Lucas blinked awake at Mike's hissing whisper, eyeing the standing form confusingly. Eleven stared him down a moment, her gaze doggedly defiant, then turned and continued on towards the door. Mike scoffed and jumped to his feet, grabbing her wrist. She turned, truly glaring at him now, "*El... privacy...?* Will is *in* there!"

Her eyes locked with his, straightening back up and allowing him to hold her hand, "No..."

His brow creased, "...what?" He felt El take *his* wrist this time, leading him *towards* the closed door. Mike was **extremely** tempted to drag her away, but all he could do was grind his heels into the

carpet, making her job twice as hard.

"What are you guys *doing?*" Lucas groaned, squinting at them and shaking his head. Dustin sat up, rubbing his eyes and watching them suspiciously. Then, Lucas and he both noticed Will's empty sleeping spot, glancing back up at their two friends, horrified. El's hand was *gripping* the doorknob.

The boys all shouted at once, "DON'T-!" The two shot to their feet, rushing over as El let the door swing open, holding Mike's hand behind her. The boys all closed their eyes, only opening them when they didn't hear any kind of horrified outburst. El released Mike's hand, her face opening up with a new peal of terror as he slowly peeled his eyes open.

"...Will..." she breathed. Mike stared in awe at his friend, motionless and prone on the bathroom floor.

"Will?" he rushed towards him in the tiny space, shaking the unconscious boy fiercely. He was immediately joined by the other two, their hands harshly shoving him as El crept to the sink, knowingly peering into the bowl. "Will? Will *wake up!*"

"What's wrong with him?!" Lucas shouted an unanswerable question.

"Mike..." she called in a soft tone, her eyes widening with fear. At first he wanted to ignore her, but then he saw the way she stared into the bowl and blasted to his feet. They all crowded around the sink, eyeing the wriggling slug that lay within.

"Shit! Another one?!" Lucas exclaimed, peering worriedly down at their sick friend.

"Oh Jesus this is bad..." Dustin crowed, returning to his knees. "Why the hell is he sleeping?!"

"I don't know!" Mike stammered, crouching beside the girl and shaking his friend.

"Should we get your parents?" Lucas urged.

"I DON'T KNOW!" Mike shot back. Eleven's brow was creased

worriedly, her lips pursing of their own accord. Mike had a lightbulb moment, peering up to eye her. "...El! Do you think you can wake him up?!" Reluctantly, she nodded in a rather unconvincing manner, sitting beside him and closing her eyes. It felt like every one of her nerves stood on end as goosebumps ravaged her skin.

"...what's she doing?" Lucas asked.

"SH! Let her focus!" Mike hissed. They watched in awe as she reached out to grip Will's cold hand, immediately flinching at some invisible energy that swiped at her chest. Suddenly, the lights flickered, then blew out completely. The boys flinched at this nostalgic reminder, turning to exchange awestruck glances.

"...if only Will could see this..." Dustin chuckled.

"SHH!" Mike and Lucas hushed him, Dustin wincing at their hisses.

"*Sorry...*" he whispered an apology. They heard Eleven inhale deeply, working *extra* hard to focus past their rambling voices. She knew once she got in, there would be no turning back...not until she located Will. A hint of doubt still plagued her. It had been *months* since she'd last attempted this...and for a moment she was worried she wouldn't be able to.

And then her eyes snapped open, her pupils dilating at the overwhelmingly dark depths. There was no light, just an open, infinite space before her. A glimmer of recognition flashed behind those hazel-brown eyes. *She'd been here before.* The girl stood on solid ground, noting the difference from when she projected from inside the bath...there was no water for her to slosh through here. She felt as if she were wandering a completely different realm, because for Eleven, this was a breakthrough. *Never* before had she done this without the help of submersion or isolation. She inhaled deeply, the plain scent of nothingness, though the smell of Mike's house seemed to linger faintly on the atmosphere. She could somehow still feel their presence surrounding her, a ghost of a hand still clutching her own. Oddly enough...this was not a comforting feeling. It made her feel like she had to protect them all, even though they weren't really *here*...wherever here was. Cautiously, her eyes flitted to an object in the distance, slowly wandering about the obscure depths. It looked

like an ant from this distance, and El squinted her eyes. She took one step towards it and it spun around to face her; she instinctively froze in response. It too fixed itself to a halt, each individual unable to identify one another from across the empty vastness. *She needed to be brave...she needed to be strong...for them.*

"...Will?" her voice echoed across the vacuum, reaching his ears easily. The boys back home flinched as her physical body spoke, calling the same name in a slightly muted voice.

She could hear their bickering voices in the distance, an echo of Dustin's voice whispering, "Do you think they can see each other?" Will heard the same voices, but something else too...something angry. It suddenly broke into a rumbling growl just behind him, sending bone-jarring chills racing along his spine. He was too petrified to turn and look, so he bolted in the opposite direction, towards the less-threatening figure in the distance. And suddenly, that same figure began sprinting towards her, traveling at full-tilt and whimpering loudly with each pant.

Eleven trembled, taking a few steps back, those brown eyes widening drastically as her voice now demanded an answer, "**Will!?**" They watched her echo the same words, in a subdued, half-conscious tone. Mike's brow creased as Will mumbled incoherently, his physical form entirely paralyzed.

"RUN! IT'S COMING!" Will screamed, now reaching her in the blackness and snatching her hand. Just before she was ripped from the spot, her mouth fell open as something shimmered into view. It growled in a ferocious tenor, racing after them like a hunter and running *far too quickly*. El yelped, her horror registering like a snapping bone from the depths of her subconscious, rippling across her face fervently. The only thing playing in her mind was Will's repeated order, "KEEP GOING! RUN!"

"What's he saying?" Lucas' voice teased them in the mire.

"I can't understand him..." Dustin whispered along the still air. Mike watched in horror as a trail of blood made its way along Eleven's lip, a deep, scarlet red.

They sprinted endlessly through the darkness, their legs strong and limber but quivering with inexorable fear. The terror struck Eleven *much* more acutely than it hampered Will, the beast reminding her of something from her past. It roared, nearly at their heels as Will made a *sharp* right, practically dragging the girl behind him. El's hand nearly *slipped* from his at the force of the turn, the beast's claws missing her head by a few inches. She felt her scalp tremble as the air swished beneath the beast's power, the ground shake beneath its paws as it skidded to a halt, its claws scraping against the pitch-black floor as the children hastily put more distance between them. El peered over her shoulder, stopping for a mere second to get a better look at the beast. "WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!" Will shrieked, rapidly pulling her arm. His teeth were chattering, his legs pounding and his skin slicked with fear. Every breath for him was a barely subdued, terrified whimper, "WE HAVE TO GO!" The beast was readying itself to pounce, its tail flicking about as numerous tentacles stretched from its shoulders, writhing maniacally. Will watched El stand her ground, glaring defensively at the beast with her head down-turned and her heels dug determinedly into the ground. Suddenly, it's glaringly yellow eyes glinted, momentarily blinding the kids. In the split second it took them to blink at this diversion, three more copies of the beast appeared beside the monster and Eleven gaped, watching in horror as the clones all vaulted themselves towards them. Both kids shrieked, Will dragging her away by the hand. They ran, barely dodging their furious swipes and razor sharp claws.

If El could compare this to one thing, it would have to be when she'd first seen the Demogorgon...and *touched* it. That single second of contact had torn a hole in space and time, allowing it to enter their world thanks to Eleven's abilities. From then on, their experiences were haplessly intertwined...at least Eleven felt they were. She'd have dreams of *being* the Demogorgon in graphic detail, experiencing the rush it felt as it ripped it's prey apart, limb from limb. Those dreams had ended once she'd killed it, seemingly ridding herself of this psychotic parasite...but it was still affecting Will physically. *She couldn't let them in again.*

Peeking over her shoulder as they ran, she noticed a few of the copies shimmering in an odd fashion. *Those are the clones*, she thought. Oddly enough, the real beast lingered far behind its brothers, walking

in a meaningful, slow fashion with its ears laid back. It seemed to be focusing hard to maintain this diversion strategy...but El saw right through this. Now she knew which one to kill, and she stiffened to a stop, glaring at the beast angrily. Will dragged her off her feet, breaking her concentration as she collapsed onto her knees. "N-NO! DON'T DO IT!" he yelled, desperately lugging her again, desperately trying to get her to her feet. He remembered Mike worrying about El's power, and he knew that if she was drained here and *now* by killing the beast...they might not make it out of here alive. There was a single moment of hesitation El spent scrambling to her feet, and it was all one of the twins needed to swipe at her back, his claws seamlessly cutting into her skin. El shrieked in horror, falling to her side and gazing up at the beast abhorrently, tensing every single muscle and waiting for something to happen...but nothing did. *Why hadn't the gate opened? They'd made contact!*

Suddenly, the clones all disappeared into clouds of dust as the real monster let out a ferocious roar, his jaws twisting in a demented snarl. Its nostrils flared, steaming like a teapot. The boy was whimpering quite loudly when he suddenly noticed Eleven crying out in agony, gripping his hand painfully. "W-What happened?! Are you okay?! C-Can you run?!" Will shouted a trillion questions. El shook her head, her face contorting as the searing pain tore across her back. Will stared back at the creature, trembling with fear as his mouth parted in shock. It was preparing to pounce, assuming the same position as it had last time, its eyes yellow and haunting. That was when something wriggled about in his pocket, something he'd *purposefully* pinched the instant he'd found himself in this place. Eleven watched through blurry vision as Will dug in his pocket, extracted the *exact same* slug he'd puked into the sink and **tossed** it directly at the monster. The instant it left his hand, the beast roared, lunging forwards with dizzying speed.

They watched, shrieking in horror as it tackled the tiny, defenseless thing, tearing it to shreds, splattering its insides about like fresh blood. Will felt sick to his stomach, unable to fathom this kind of death. Eleven knew it was all over. As soon as it was done *devouring* that useless thing...*they were next*. Will eyed her helplessly, "WHAT DO WE DO?!" El watched, her expression illustrating her hopelessness as she clasped their hands together. She simply turned to face the



monster, struggling to surmount her choking fears and preparing herself to kill it when it's yellow eyes leered up at them. It's slit-like pupils dilated threateningly and both Will and Eleven shook with terror, wincing with fright and holding each other tighter. The beast licked its jowls, hissing at them menacingly...and *then*, promptly turned away, walking off and disappearing into a flurrying cloud of mist. They watched in amazement, gulping down their first semi-relaxed breaths.

"Gone..." El gasped, tightening her grip on Will's hand. Then, to her immense horror, the boy dropped to the floor and she was suddenly grasping thin air. Will's form was materializing into nothing more than a colorful cloud, fading away into oblivion. El watched this, quivering and shaking her head. "NO..." she whimpered in a breathy shout, shivering uncontrollably. **"NO!"**

"...NO!" she yelped, jerking back into consciousness. The boys were surrounding her again, fussing all over them with endless relief and curiosity.

"EL!" Mike nearly screamed. "El you're okay!" Tears stained her face, joining the blood already dripping down her lip and jawline. She grimaced, leaning her head into Mike's shoulder as he blinked in amazement, trying to imagine what had just happened.

"Oh my god..." Dustin sighed with relief.

"What happened?!" Lucas immediately questioned as Mike gripped her shoulders comfortingly. That familiar taste of blood leaked from her nose and between her lips as she looked down to Will, his hand still white-knuckling her own. After a moment, he too woke up, blinking at the sudden onslaught of hands and voices.

"...w-whoa..." he stammered, smiling tiredly at his friends.

"WILL!" the boys all cheered, Lucas being the first to capture his friend in a crushing hug. Will coughed jokingly between their arms as Dustin joined in. Mike remained at El's side, noticing her face cringing with something akin to torture.

"Oh man! We thought you were gone again!" Dustin exclaimed,

holding Will's shoulder reassuringly.

"I...I don't know..." he stammered, still recovering from his terrifying adventure. "I thought I was too..." Despite this worrying statement, they chose to quell their fears and doubts. They simply relished in the fact that he was here beside them. For Will, it was like their hands were anchors to this world...and he deeply wished he could somehow tell them that. But something still gnawed at his brain, and somehow he wriggled free, rising to his feet a little unsteadily. He peered into the sink, gripping its porcelain edge. The slug was gone. Will began sorting through his racing thoughts. *That wasn't the Upside Down...it was something else. So...if the slug was killed in that realm...maybe it went away here too?* Lucas and Dustin stood beside him, keeping steady hands on his shoulders. "...did it go down the drain?" Will asked, still catching his breath as if he'd just ran a marathon.

Lucas stood beside him, squinting in an incredulous manner, "...um... does it *matter*?" Will locked eyes with him, his brow creasing in an uncharacteristically serious way.

"We're not sure...we were watching El use her *superpowers*," Dustin raised his eyebrows humorously. Will did not smile at this, eyeing her worriedly as he remembered another terrifying possibility.

"Mike..." she gasped, baring her teeth and biting back tears. She was gripping his arm tightly, trying to express her agony, wincing over and over with every little movement. The scorching pain was so intense, her breaths were coming shorter and quicker, rendering her speechless. He was simply lost in her face, unable to look away for fear of missing some sort of wordless cue.

"E-El?! Are you hurt? It's okay! You're back! You're safe!" he captured her in a hug and she whimpered, pushing him away and sobbing at the stinging sensation.

"No..." she gasped, trying to make him understand. Mike went back to holding her shoulders, inadvertently noticing his sleeves...which were now stained with some kind of dark liquid. Mike's brow creased, believing it to be paint at first. But to his overwhelmingly severe panic, Dustin gasped and pointed to her back, his eyes widening in horror.

"What is that?!" he shouted. They all looked at the red streaks leaking through her shirt, watching her gasp at the shooting anguish. Will inhaled sharply, his brow creasing in shock.

It was horrible, and had cost his new friend her safety...but now he knew. He knew *exactly* what had happened to him whenever he let himself slip into that ceaseless, black void...and what could still happen if he fell into it again.

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: Thank you so much for reading! I've been *very* busy these past couple days and was **dying** to finish this! So, I hope you guys enjoyed this! Stay tuned for more chapters and tell me what you think, good or bad! Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*

## 26. The In-Between

### Chapter Twenty-Six – The In-Between

"Eleven! Eleven, listen listen...on a scale of one to ten, how bad is the pain?"

"**Really** Dustin?!" Lucas exclaimed, shooting him a savage glare. El had resigned herself to her stomach, this being the most agreeable position...but the pain was inescapable and *searing*, mind-numbingly unbearable. Tears leaked down and across her cheeks and onto the bathroom floor. She whimpered, gritting her teeth and pointing to her small tattoo as a reply to Dustin's question. The boy pursed his lips, eyeing an extremely frantic Mike.

"...okay so...she said it was an eleven..."

"Dustin *please* shut up," Mike asked in an annoyed soprano. So far, the blood had only soaked into her shirt...but they knew they'd have to get *at* the wound if they wanted to keep it that way. "...we need to see it," Mike said, bravely reaching for the bottom of her shirt. Will's eyes widened instinctively as Dustin rose to his feet and promptly left the bathroom.

"**What** are you doing!?" Lucas swiped his hand away.

"**She's in pain!** How else are we supposed to help her?!"

"I don't *know*!" Lucas shot back, his brow creasing angrily. El's breathing was shallow, every expansion of her lungs bringing that much more torment upon her back. She was clutching one of Mike's hands, leaving disagreeable red marks between the junctions of his fingers. "...but we need to get somebody who *can*..."

"W-What about Nancy?" Will spoke up. Mike's face opened at this suggestion, slipping from El's grasp and exploding to his feet, pushing past a panicky Dustin. He practically sprinted up the steps while the two boys eyed their inconsolable friend.

"Oh my god oh my god oh my god..." Dustin paced about the

basement, his fingers combing through the tangles and curls that composed his light chestnut hair.

"Dustin...try to calm down, okay?" Will asked, gaining his immediate attention. His hazel orbs stared back into angry blue ones.

"Calm down?!" Dustin groaned in a shaky breath, "How are you *not* scared?! Do you even *see* the blood?" Lucas knelt beside her, a comforting hand on her shoulder, unwilling to try and tend to her back. He knew how he was whenever *he* was in pain, and he wasn't too fond of her *throwing* him across the room or something along those lines...

Will eyed Dustin carefully, easily answering his question with, "...if you had seen what we just saw, you wouldn't be scared as much."

"But we don't even know what happened! What if we're *all* in danger?! What if there's a monster walking around us *right now* in the Upside Down and we just can't see it!?" El's eyes widened fearfully, gritting her teeth against a biting sensation.

"...Dustin, it's *always* like that..." Will practically droned, his eyes wide and hollow. "...I think I know what happened...I just...w-we should wait until Mike gets back...because I think, we *all* need to know." Lucas and Dustin exchanged a fretful glance as El bit back a sob, a particularly agonizing pain suddenly shooting across her spine.

Dustin went back to pacing, shaking his head and mumbling an incoherent refrain. The only words they picked up were, "...mental, mental, this is *so* mental..."

"Nancy..." Mike fervently tapped her shoulder. She mumbled in her sleep, shrugging his fingers from her in a groggy movement. So, he abrasively shoved the same spot, exclaiming in a demanding whisper, "NANCY, **wake up!**"

Her eyes fluttered open, and she immediately scowled at him. "*Mike?* What are you doing in here? Get out of my-"

"Nancy *please* wake up! We need your help..." he began in a hushed, pleading tone. *Wow...he sounds pretty serious.* Reluctantly, she sat up

against her fluffy pillows, blinking in the looming darkness. He was only a familiar ghost to her, silhouetted by the light pouring in from the hall, his edges hazy and blurred together. She reached across the nightstand and flicked her lamp on, casting soft shadows across his face and beneath his bangs. Now she could see it, that look, and *know* that something was truly wrong. "It's El...she's *really* hurt and we *need* you to help her." Mike spoke in a rapid, low tone that made her pulse quicken. His dark eyes nearly melted into his hair, staring wide and pointed; his hands were pressed onto the side of her bed entreatingly.

"...w-what?" Nancy sounded shocked. *Had she heard him correctly? Was...was El still here? In the house?* She thought Joyce would've picked her up by now...

Mike scoffed, "Will puked up a slug and..." Both pairs of eyes broadened in the glow, one of them stunned and the other instantly contrite. Before anything was said, her demanding glower elicited a dreadful sigh from him, and he closed his eyes in regret. The beans had been spilt...there was no turning back thanks to his slip of tongue.

"-WHAT?!" she demanded in a pointed whisper, shooting him a glare.

"Just..." Mike broke into another exasperated sigh. "I'll explain everything in a minute. Can you just come help Eleven? *Please?* She's in *a lot* of pain, and this *needs* to stay a secret...you **can't** tell Mom or Dad." Her brow pinched worriedly as she considered the innumerable possibilities. For some odd reason, she imagined the strange girl levitating everything in the basement at once, or maybe even one of the boys as a form of entertainment. *Don't tell me she broke something...*

"Mike, *what* happened?" she demanded once again, eyeing him sternly, her voice low and unyielding.

"I'll tell you in a second!" he ushered in a hissing murmur. "Please..." It was the way he clutched the door frame, his legs trembling like a jack rabbit, his eyes *imploringly* severe. His lips were slightly parted and his teeth were clenched together, remembering she was in pain *this very moment* and that Nancy was wasting an unforgivable amount of time. And his sister seemed to pick up on this, reading his dire

expression and slowly sitting up, her eyes even more concerned.

"...okay," she flipped the covers off, silently following a frenetic Mike downstairs and into the basement. Dustin saw them approach, Mike in his sweatpants and white t-shirt and Nancy in her blue-clad pajamas. He led her straight to the bathroom door and she stopped just short of the threshold, gaping in horror at what she saw. The two boys met her gaze, their eyes just as pleading.

El's dark shirt was soaked maroon with blood, and there were stains on the floor...stains they'd have to somehow hide. It was the most blood Nancy had ever seen in her life, not to mention in the anodyne confines of her own house. El was crying bitterly into her wrist, her arms crossed before her as Nancy rapidly absorbed the severity of the situation. This was now an emergency. *How could Mike let this happen?! How did this even happen?!* Tons of questions readied themselves like an army, their meanings invalid and fruitless because Nancy was stunned silent. Mike began to talk over her dissenting thoughts and moderate the *horrendous* scene, "She has a cut on her back but we can't-

"Mike I'm *getting* Mom," Nancy announced, striding back towards the stairs.

To her great surprise, an accented quartet of, "NO!" stopped her mid-stride.

Mike continued, "We *can't* let Mom or Dad know...they'll *never* let her come back over!"

"...they wouldn't understand..." the usually reserved Will spoke up, his wide, vacant eyes telling of some deep, perturbed disturbance. Unless she couldn't remember correctly, his pallor appeared whiter than normal...*is he feeling okay?*

"Mike I-I..." Nancy shook her head. She was only a teenager herself, she was no doctor! While Nancy couldn't say she was squeamish, the sight of blood still managed to repulse her to a considerable extent... and that was when she *didn't* factor in the ironic location of her own home. "...I *can't!* I-I'm not a *doctor* Mike! W-What if I mess up!?"

"You're the *only* one who can!" Mike pressed her in a piercing voice, his eyes flicking worriedly to the stairs. He hoped his parent's hadn't heard that...there was *no way* they could explain this...not now...not when none of them even understood what had happened.

"No...Mike I *really* can't..." Nancy declared, stomping up to him, her eyes a ferocious blue.

"Yes you can!" he swore, enunciating each word with a nod of his head. "...remember when I fell off my bike and scraped my cheek?"

"Mike, that is ***nothing*** compared to-"

"-I KNOW! I know, but...remember how much blood there was?" Neither of them had been old enough to understand the fact that facial wounds bled endlessly. "You helped Dad fix it! You weren't grossed out or anything! You kept *laughing* at me because of the way I fell...remember?" Nancy shook her head, peering back into the doorway. El had slowly closed her eyes, resting her forehead against the floor and grimacing at the agonizing pain. Nancy nearly winced for her, those blue eyes filling with water. But seeing this girl like that – the girl who hours before had been passionately captivated by the simplest chords of a piano – woke something within her, bearing the ferocity of a hundred lions. She *knew* why they couldn't help her...and out of everything else they could've done (though their options were slim, she felt they would've come up with something) they'd trusted **her**. There was no question; she **had** to do this.

Pursing her lips, Nancy stepped determinedly into the bathroom, giving Lucas and Will mere seconds to exit before she closed the door on them. She knelt down to try and get a very sensitive Eleven to look at her. "Hey..." she gingerly met her shoulder with the edge of her knuckle and El sobbed, peering at her from the corner of her puffy eyes. Nancy sighed, her eyes moistening impulsively. "...I'm gonna help you...okay?"

A heartbreaking moment passed between the two girls. "...o-okay," the youngest whimpered, nodding against her forearm and biting back the worst of it.

The boys stood outside, their eyes baring down on the timbers of the



wooden door, utterly dumbfound and shell-shocked. Will was the first to sit down, expecting them to request an immediate explanation. Instead, they all slowly returned to their seats, waiting in a choking cloud of thickening silence. It was just like that night they'd waited for Will in the hospital...except, this was Mike's basement and Will was *right* here. The atmosphere was just as glaringly somber...until one of them eventually broke the silence. "...how did she even get hurt?" They all turned towards Lucas, who was shaking his head, intriguingly slow. "We were there the *whole time*, and *nothing* happened!" Mike remained pensive, trying to replay the whole experience. There had been a split-second of pain he'd noticed shoot across her face, and at the time, he'd assumed it was something inconsequentially small, like some kind of bug bite...but she'd been attacked.

Will took a deep breath, accepting their expectant stares, "I...I think we were somewhere else..." He scoffed at his own words, shaking his head. "...it's stupid..."

"Tell us," Mike demanded in a hasty tone.

"Yeah," Lucas chimed in.

"...I'm not even sure if it's right," Will admitted. "...it's just an estimate..."

"Well, when Eleven gets out here, we can ask her," Mike proposed.

"Yeah!" Dustin rang out, searching about for their Dungeons and Dragons book.

"There's no *way* the Weirdo *won't* know what you're talking about," Lucas stated, his voice deafeningly sarcastic. Will pursed his lips, going over everything he'd just witnessed in his head like a study guide for their final exams.

Suddenly, Nancy appeared in the doorway, peeking through the small opening. They all immediately jumped to their feet, Mike apprehensively fiddling with his pockets. Her eyes were grave, "I need a *warm* washcloth." They all feverishly nodded, Mike sprinting upstairs and into the bathroom. In a flash he returned, holding a

damp cloth out to her. He lingered at the door longer than expected, pinching his right thumb anxiously.

"...is she-?"

"I need Dad's first aid kit..." Nancy asked, keeping the door mostly closed with an outstretched hand. He left in the blink of an eye, returning with a clunky red box and passing it through the opening. Nancy was about to close them out again when she noticed Mike's expression, his eyes gleamingly watery and his mouth trapped in a worried frown. His body quivered with some kind of electricity that made his stomach boil. When he looked closely enough, he recognized that same anguish tainting her blue irises, poignant yet terribly suppressed. "...Mike," Nancy asked for his attention. He locked eyes with her, and they shared a brief, wordless moment of potent grief. "...whatever happened...*however* this happened...it's gonna be okay. *She's* gonna be okay..." Nancy vowed with a slow nod, her eyes wide and thoughtful. Silently, he acknowledged this with a bitter nod, his brow tightening forbearingly. She deserved a *complete* explanation...he knew that much, sadly, he wasn't sure they had one to offer! Plus, this was *Nancy*...his brave, reinvented, badass-of-a-sister. An odd calm seeped through him, and he staggered his breaths, turning back to sit on the couch with his friends. *She'll take care of her...she will.* The wizard watched, his eyes large and foreboding as Nancy shut the door behind her.

She turned back to El, still face down but peeking at her from over her shoulder. The older one was still clutching the warm washcloth, placing it onto the edge of the sink and scooching closer to the girl. The blood was just *too much*...Nancy was surprised she was still functioning at this point. It tinted everything a sickeningly deep red, soaking into the girl's shirt and threatening to coalesce on the floor in a small, dark pool. Nancy gingerly hooked her fingers under the bottom of the cloth, "I'm gonna take this off, okay?" El nodded, pulling her arms out of the sleeves and suppressing a shriek from the pain ripping across her back. Somehow, they worked together and managed to slip the material over El's head...then Nancy saw the wound itself. Her gut twisted in a primal, visceral reaction, noting how the soaked cotton had left red streaks along the back of her neck and shoulders. It was as if she'd taken a paintbrush to her, spreading

the blood around like some kind of malevolent artist.

Three jagged scars marred her back, the longest at the top while the other two sat below it, a mere shadow of their larger counterpart. Each one was irate and deliberate, the highest stretching from El's right shoulder blade to the lowest of her left ribs. The smaller twins mocked their neighbor, beginning a bit beneath the first and ending at the curve of her spine. Each laceration itself – thankfully – wasn't deep enough to require stitches...she'd apparently been quite lucky. But the blood *needed* to stop. The anxious teenager gripped the washcloth determinedly, closing her eyes and pursing her lips. Her heart was beating out of her chest as she tried to steady her breaths. *Get it together Nancy...you can do this. It's only blood. It's **only** blood...* she opened her eyes. Thick, ruby tears leaked from the three scratches, inching down El's flanks along the path of least resistance. The eldest grimaced, sitting cross-legged beside Eleven, her knee softly touching the girl's hip. "Okay..." Nancy convinced herself in a quiet exhale. "...I'm gonna clean you up...okay?"

"...okay," El agreed after the tiniest of hesitations. Nancy reached, placing the cloth against her pale skin, wiping the tears and stains. She tried avoiding the cuts for now...she'd take care of those in a minute...*somehow*...

"...h-how did this happen?" Nancy asked in a tremulous voice.

El shook her head, breaking into a chorus of breathy sobs. With each bout of crying, her unsteady gasps and shivers caused the wounds to bleed, thus bringing her more pain, and more tears. It was an endless domino effect Nancy didn't have the heart to stop...she could only help clean up the blood. "...bad..." It was all she could say, somehow pitching backwards in her memory to the very *source* of this trauma. The Bad Men, those tests she now thought of as, "her chores." Her stolen life...Eleven couldn't count the number of times she sat, re-imagining how she would've been had she *not* been born into that cold, hard place with these innate abilities. *What if she really **had** been Nancy's sister and Mike's not-sister? And Joyce was her Mommy? And Huxley trusted her like he did Will and Jonathan?* Everything here reminded her of what she'd missed out on...and most of it was indescribably beautiful. *Especially* the people. But then there were other neat things like music, the stars, the *food* – she almost couldn't

fathom it –and the games...it all struck Eleven as glossy and innovative, while her friends went about it with a mundane, pattern-like, routine. Mike was the *most* animated whenever he was showing her something new, priding himself in answering *all* of her questions and delighting in her expressive reactions. Still, even if they *were* too tired to partake in Eleven's daily discoveries and the joy she derived from this world, their actions and words of wisdom only *enriched* her experiences; never had their presence taken away from her explorations...not once.

She understood their backgrounds were haplessly different; Will had nearly suffered a mental breakdown just before, but El had held it together, focused on getting them home and out of the never-ending darkness. It had been everything she *didn't* want...to bring them into *her* world, to introduce them to *her* raw past. All she wanted was to live in theirs...but her history seemed to stick with her, as enduring as the tattoo on her right arm; permanent...never far behind her, like an unwelcome cue or a reoccurring nightmare. She was making progress...but Eleven began to see that there was still a *long* road ahead. Right now, they'd broken down at the intersection of needing to understand her powers and that place. Eleven swore to herself she'd give them every bit of valid information she knew so they could form some kind of consensus, hopefully working to prevent future visits. Will Byers had been through enough...

"...something bad?" Nancy repeated, pressing the cloth into the wound. She could see every one of her tiny muscles contract as she held in a scream, balling her fists unimaginably tight. El's vision dotted over with hazy blotches for a moment, and she thought she might pass out. She couldn't tell how close this was to being the reality, her agony crowning to a peak, spreading throughout the top of her cranium like warm bath water. "Sorry..." Nancy whispered, gripping El's shoulder. She did the best she could, going about cleaning the wound as painlessly as possible. Still, Eleven had to bite back sobs and shrieks and restrain herself from kicking the girl across the room. Her teeth hurt from biting down on nothing for so long and she hummed, slamming her fist into the flat of the floor.

"Almost done..." Nancy promised. There was that figure again... *almost*. It was almost as confounding to her as the word *soon*. El

sucked in a breath, eagerly awaiting the end of this brutal torture. Nancy *was not* medically trained, but somehow she'd talked herself through it. *Sanitize the wound...stop the bleeding...compress...keep it from opening back up...and keep it clean.* Somewhere in the back of her mind stood Jonathan Byers. She tried to imagine what he would do if this were Will and he was here with her; Nancy had to fight hard to channel that confident aura Jonathan initiated so effortlessly. "Okay...don't move yet," Nancy warned. *El wouldn't dream of it.* The blood had stopped, but that dull ache had sharpened itself to a piercing head. The cuts respired with her every inhale and brought her *the harshest* of pains, and Nancy heard her release a seething exhale. Digging about in the kit, she grasped at some roller gauze, deciding it was soft and breathable enough to do...for now. "Here, I need you to sit up..." Nancy gingerly gripped her arms.

"No..." El shook her head, swallowing a shriek and swiveling her head to gaze over her bare shoulder. Nancy saw how those hazel eyes were not dark or glaring...they were wide and anxious; cautious and afraid. A line of blood leaked from her left nostril as they exchanged worried stares, Nancy's hands still grasping El's scrawny biceps.

El watched the girl shake her head, biting her trembling lip before saying, "...I *have* to do this." Without warning Nancy hoisted her up and against the wall. El cried out, sliding her legs around to kick them out in front of her. She gritted her teeth, grimacing open-mouthed as her shoulder pressed into the hard surface. Eleven suddenly wanted nothing more than to break something between her hands, trembling at the seething torment. As a result of this, the cuts began to seep, tears spilling from two parts of her once again. "...*shit*," Nancy swore, standing up to rinse the cloth free of old blood and returning to dab at her back. El winced with each instance of contact, her eyes red and irritated. She desperately wanted to launch herself into the corner, press her back to the wall and shield herself from everyone who only wanted to help her. There was an *intense* throbbing sensation, beating her brain into a mush...but this was a familiar pain. It always happened whenever she cried too long; Eleven knew this. Nancy did too.

Once the bleeding appeared to stop, Nancy grabbed a trauma bandage, placing it firmly against the cuts. It was large enough to

cover all three lacerations in their entirety, so Nancy snatched some roller gauze from the box and wrapped it around El's midsection and beneath her arms, circling her multiple times like a spider spins its web. "...is it too tight?" Nancy asked. El shook her head, her brain hurting too much to reply with even the shortest of sentences. Nancy pulled some medical tape from the box, fastening it to El's back and sides. In moments, her job was complete...at least, it *looked* that way. A snug wrap encompassed the small girl's torso, holding a thick, absorbent layer of padding against her back. Nancy watched it for a moment, waiting for the blood to seep through or leak out from beneath...but it didn't. The wounds held, seemingly spent from losing all those red tears. El blinked at the way it felt on her body, her lips parting in a silent moment of stunning reminiscence. Some unchecked memory came echoing from the caverns of her subconscious...startling applicable to this very moment.

*Her bare feet plodded frigid against the enormous slab of concrete they called the floor. Each step was slow and deliberate, her hand gently resting within his firm grip. They were walking away from the elevator into what Papa referred to as "the basement." It was enough for Eleven to surmise that they were below her living quarters, possibly underground. It certainly explained the coldness of everything...even the walls made her shiver. The people weren't much warmer.*

*They suddenly stood before an ovular door, Eleven on his left, her skull barely reaching the middle part of his bicep. He gave her a moment to peer into the room with the tank and the numerous strangers and scientists. The only familiar face she could pick out was her doctor...the rest were all aliens to her. Now they were walking in, stepping over the lip of the door and immediately drawing the attention of **everyone** inside. She returned their curious stares with her trademark, absent glare. Only Brenner could see the beginnings of her eyebrows peaking slightly in the center, hinting at her fears and doubt. He needed to crush that feeling, immediately.*

*"It's okay Eleven...don't be frightened," Brenner assured her in a gentle, coaxing tone. It was how he spoke to her, and **only** her. "These are all friends." She highly doubted that. "They're just here to watch..." she eyed them with a curious indifference, trailing close by his side. They were just passing the bath, and she couldn't help but gaze at the bubbling, cyan*

liquid that swirled within. It hummed with all the electricity it took to power. A dark man with a clipboard watched her watch him and she looked away as he scribbled something down halfheartedly. Three more people stood in front of them, and many more surrounded them all, above and around them on all sides, whispering to each other in low tones and murmurs. It was the most crowded place she'd ever stepped into, and she began to reevaluate her previous agreement. Brenner looked down, his smile only slightly comforting, "...don't focus on them." She couldn't help it; there were just so many! From the edge of her vision, she saw his arm raise and felt his fingers tap her forehead affectionately, "Stay in here, like before."

"Yes Papa." They made their way up the ladder, and this was when he released her hand. She pursed her lips at the loss of contact, watching as the strong man unlocked the bath with a pull of the wheel. A different man fetched her a crown of electrodes, placing it delicately onto her cranium with a smoothing of his palms against her scalp.

Papa continued his attempts to console her, crouching down to her level, "Now remember...whatever it is it can't hurt you. Not from here." He took her hand, guiding her towards the bath. "So there's nothing to be frightened of." She stepped onto the metal, gripping the bars and balancing herself on the mechanism. "It's reaching out to you...because it wants you," he puzzled, circling to stand before her momentarily. "Hmm?" Brenner leant in, smiling into her open, unchanging face. There was no way to gauge her fear like the electrodes could monitor her brain waves... he didn't know what she saw, or was about to see; though he desperately wanted to. "...so don't turn away from it this time. I want you to find it. Understand?" For a moment his smile dropped, and his eyes went stern.

A moment passed as the strong man beside her readied himself, gripping the oxygenated helmet, but not lifting it just yet. It was as if they were actually going to wait for her agreed consent in this matter. "Yes." Brenner nods, and she is slowly being lowered into the water. The soles of her feet tingle, and then her ankles, and soon enough the liquid is lapping at her belly. At this point the strong man lifts the enormous mass, waiting for her to be submerged up to her chest, then lowering the helmet onto her. If she tried wearing this outside of the tank, she'd be crushed...luckily it weighed a fraction of its true mass while submerged. He had to wait for it, eyeballing the perfect moment, then slowly releasing the mass onto her

shoulders with a splay of his outstretched fingers. Eleven wasn't exactly sure how this...**thing** kept her head dry...but she wasn't about to ask. It must've had something to do with the yellow wire that followed her down...but it suddenly didn't matter. They would close the window soon...and she'd be alone again. She stepped from the platform, feeling lighter than normal and suddenly graceful in all her aquatic slowness.

Brenner leant over the edge, peering down at the man below him, not caring enough to know his name and ordering, "Shut the window as soon as you can. She needs to focus...there can be no distractions." Two men stood before the tank...neither of them were Papa. That was weird...he always waved to her before she left. Before she could even hope to find him, a man in a white coat hastily closed the window, and her bubbling, underwater world suddenly turned black. She remembered the last thing she wondered about was how she was staying submerged...it couldn't have been just the weight of the helmet. Eleven could feel it bouncing lightly against her shoulders, barely heavy enough to remain at this depth. How was she staying down? There had to be some plausible explanation...

It was the suit. Eleven felt the pad against her back and remembered the weight of the suit, burdening her above water and around the facility. It had been designed to keep her submerged so that even if she tried to swim out or float...she couldn't. It seemed a trivial thing to wonder about...but Eleven couldn't help it. She was an innately curious individual with a staggering amount of intelligence...so whatever she wondered, she typically found out. Then something else banged against her brain. *Papa was wrong. It **can** hurt you from there.* Nancy's hesitant voice brought her back to the present, "...I guess that'll have to do for now..." She twisted the knob and peered through the door's opening, out at the boys. Mike had remained on the couch while Dustin had returned to his paces; Lucas was leaning with one foot against a wall while Will was sitting with Mike, still looking abnormally pale and clammy. Mike immediately jumped to his feet, awaiting Nancy's words, "I need a shirt...a *big* one." While the others simply stared at his sister, Mike nodded, rushing upstairs. Mike *sprinted* into his room, digging through his drawers to find a suitable top. His fingers latched onto that same dark blue sweater he'd given her months ago, and when he pulled it out to look at, he pursed his lips and shut the drawer. Something in his heart pitched about happily. *Hopefully it was big enough...*



He rushed back to the basement, holding it out to his sister, "Here!"

"Thanks," she nodded, shutting the door. Nancy turned back to Eleven who was still recovering from everything, adjusting to the strange new feeling of having gauze taped to her. "Mike brought you something to wear," Nancy announced. El turned to look at it, instantly recognizing the dark blue. To Nancy's surprise, El reached out and took it, bringing it to her chest and crowing her head down to inhale her brother's scent. At first, Nancy was *quite* perturbed by this, but then she chuckled. El's eyes instantly demanded an explanation when Nancy chortled, "...hopefully it's, *somewhat* clean..."

El blinked, the hints of a smile curling her lips as she slipped the sweater over her head. Once her head was through the hole, Nancy recognized that look of pain and helped her with the sleeves. *The less movement, the better*. Eleven nearly smiled at the warmth this certain shirt brought her. It was much better than a hospital gown or a weighted suit. "Okay..." Nancy let out a sigh, watching the girl, her eyes a bit more hopeful. El's looked exhausted...half-lidded and hazy. "...do you think you can stand?" the teenager asked, her brow creasing worriedly. After an instance of contemplation, Eleven nodded, closing her eyes.

"Yes..." Her hands spread themselves against the solid ground and she rose to her haunches. Nancy's hands steadied her as she winced, rising to her knees, then to her feet all by themselves. She took a moment, pressing her shoulder into the wall and testing the feeling of the bandages. She looked up at the girl who'd helped her, her eyes tired yet searching.

"...how do you feel?" she asked, gripping her shoulder for support.

Eleven breathed, blinking slow and deliberate. "...safe..."

Nancy returned a tender smile, giving her shoulder a tiny squeeze and nodding, "...good. You always are when you're here..." Eleven returned an even stare, outright refusing this statement due to recent events. She inhaled through her nose, squinting her eyes a tad and maintaining a silent glare that made the eldest count her words. Nancy suddenly realized the hypocrisy of her statement, her gaze

lowering to the floor regretfully. *She needed answers...now.* Wordlessly, they headed to the exit, and the boys all rushed to the threshold as El stood in the doorway. They took her arms, helping her to the couch, Mike clearing a spot on the cushion she'd always favored. Nancy was frozen in the doorway, leering down at the floor when Mike trod over.

"What is it?" he asked, following her gaze and staring. Chills wracked their bodies, taking in the sight of blood stains and red-soaked cloth on their bathroom floor.

"...how are we supposed to keep *this* from them?" Nancy asked, turning to eye her brother. Mike's brow lowered in a determined nature as two of the boys joined him and his sister by the bathroom.

"...we have to clean it," he declared evenly. Dustin and Lucas eyed each other nervously as Will and Eleven remained on the couch, staring thoughtfully at one another.

"...a-are you okay?" Will finally asked in a quiet voice.

"Y-Yes..." she nodded, her eyes just as wide as his. They stared a moment longer, seemingly reading each other's thoughts.

"...what was that place?" he asked, his brow creasing worriedly. "I know it wasn't the Upside Down..." El nodded at this, fiddling with her fingers in her lap. She peered down at them silently when his voice pressed, "...you don't know what it is...do you?" Eleven gazed up at him, her eyes tired and sad.

"...no..." her head shook, her shoulders lower than normal. Those hazel eyes closed, and she looked *extremely* disappointed in herself, apologizing in the tiniest of voices, "...I'm sorry."

"...it's okay," Will assured her, regaining El's attention. "I didn't really expect you to know..." he confessed in an understanding tone. Then, he straightened up a bit, his eyes suddenly bright and positive, "We'll figure it out...together."

El nodded, smiling with him, "...together..." It was slowly becoming one of her favorite words. Both children exchanged a hopeful glance,

turning their gazes to the D&D book that waited on the table.

They turned their heads as Mike suddenly began barking orders, "Dustin, I need you to get that blue bucket from the garage. Lucas, can you get the bleach from under the kitchen sink?"

"...bleach?" he repeated as Dustin set off towards the door.

"Yeah...it's the only thing that'll clean the blood..." Nancy informed him. "Just, be *careful*...don't spill it." A tad reluctantly, Lucas nodded, stealthily trekking up those basement stairs. Dustin was sifting through the Wheelers' garage, making a ruckus. They could hear him from *inside* the basement. "*Mike*," Nancy warned.

He sighed, scoffing a bit and rushing outside. They heard his far-away hiss, "Dustin! Be *quiet*!"

"Sorry!" Dustin whispered back in a comical tenor. It was around this time that Lucas returned with the white jug.

"Is this it?" he held the label out for Nancy to see.

"Yeah! Thanks," she nodded, taking the bottle from his hands, watching as the others returned with the blue bucket. Nancy silently unscrewed the cap and poured just a splash into the bucket, capping it wordlessly.

Lucas' brow pinched, "...that's all?"

She went about lifting the bucket so she could fill it with water from the sink, turning back to eye him, "...yeah."

"...you barely poured any in there!" Mike gestured wildly, squinting at her.

"Don't worry..." Nancy grimaced, clutching the bucket against the weight of the water. "...you guys will be able to smell it soon..." And smell it they did...the aroma was practically *burning* Nancy's eyes. She placed the mixture onto the floor, shaking her head at the noxious scent and reaching blindly for a towel. Then she thought twice, grabbing the blood-stained shirt and cloth.

"...can bleach get blood out of clothes too?" Dustin asked, his eyes optimistically cerulean.

Nancy frowned, another doubt planting itself in her brain, driving worry throughout her system like a sedative, "...I don't think so..." All their expressions dimmed, their shoulders sagging hopelessly.

"Well...it's not like your mom's gonna notice *one* missing towel..." Lucas shrugged. Mike and Nancy unanimously shot him a glare, and he pursed his lips, his eyes broadening with alarm.

"...yes *she will*," they assured him in near-perfect sync.

"Well...the shirt's mine so..." Will rose to his feet. He stood beside them at the door, studying the bloodied clothing and shrugging, "I can just throw it away or hide it somewhere..."

"No...you know what? We can fix this," Mike assured them. "Lucas, how much money do you have?"

His brow immediately creased, "...why?!"

"Just *tell* me!" Mike demanded. They watched as the boy rolled his eyes and shook his head, digging in his pockets for the loose change.

"I've got..." he trailed off, opening his palm and counting the coins with a finger. "...sixty-five cents."

"And you?" Mike asked Dustin.

"Uh..." he extracted the coins. "Eighty-three..."

"I've got thirty-seven cents..." Will pushed his hand into the circle, sharing his loot.

Mike turned to Nancy, "How much do you think the laundromat charges?"

"I don't know!" she shrugged incredulously. Mike wordlessly lowered his shoulders, giving her a look. "We can worry about that tomorrow," Nancy went on to dip the new cloth into the bleach mixture, soaking it through and wiping the floor with it. Once it was

as clean as she was going to get it and her eyes stung bitterly, she dropped the cloth into the sink and stood, hefting the blue plastic into her arms and pouring its contents into the toilet bowl. She flushed it down, hoping the smell would eventually disperse itself and disappear. Nancy stood before them, clenching the bucket and eyeing them all sternly, "Right now, we need to *talk*." They all pursed their lips, turning to watch Will, who turned to eye Eleven. She rose to her feet, standing to meet their gazes.

After returning everything to its place, they sat around the book, Eleven, Will and Nancy sharing the couch while Dustin, Lucas and Mike sat in the folding chairs they used during their games. Will began, "...wherever we were...it *wasn't* the Upside Down. We were somewhere else, but it was like..." he sighed, trailing off and pursing his lips. His friends patiently waited, eyeing him attentively. "...it was like we were somewhere, but...*nowhere*, at the same time." El watched him, her exhaustion posing a great hindrance to her constantly bustling mind, clamoring with thoughts and words too complex for speech.

"...so...there weren't any trees?" Nancy asked.

They all eyed her as Will responded, "...no. It was just blackness...there was *nothing* there, except for us..." he trailed off. "And that *thing*..."

"...what thing?" Lucas pressed.

"Was it the Demogorgon?" Dustin asked, his eyes wide with fear.

"No...*no*," Will dismissed this, trying to shake off those flashbacks.

"The Demogorgon is *dead*. The Weirdo killed it...*remember?*" Lucas stressed in a slightly comical, slightly rude tone. Dustin squinted at him incredulously.

"Yeah...besides, whatever was chasing us in there...it moved on all four legs..." Will forced himself to think back, the fear seamlessly playing across his face. "...it was like a HUGE, black, leopard..."

"...like a jaguar!?" Dustin asked, correcting him slightly. Lucas shot

him a glare and smacked Dustin's chest with the back of a hand.

"Guys *stop it!*" Mike warned. Grudgingly, they kept their hands to themselves, glaring at each other readily. "El...is that what got you?"

"Yes," she confirmed with a knowing nod.

"...but there's more," Will continued to reel them in, hoping he explained it correctly. "She stopped and tried to do something to it, and when we were staring at it, it's eyes flashed...like, those really bright lights on a car..."

"Oh...high-beams," Lucas pointed.

"E-Exactly! We couldn't see, and when I opened my eyes...there were *three more* cats..." Nancy and the boys all stared, their expressions mixed and ominous, different variations of horror. "...they all looked the same. They almost got us...but then I guess the real one got tired...or something..."

"Guys..." Dustin reached out, flipping through the pages of their D&D book.

"Dustin, *come on* man!" Lucas groaned. "We don't have time for your-!"

"No LOOK!" he pointed at a picture of one of the monsters. Will and Eleven peered in, studying the drawing for all it was worth and revisiting that still fresh memory. Her eyes widened, blinking with shock as Will watched fearfully. "Did it look *anything* like that?" Dustin demanded, pointing to an illustration of the Displacer Beast. It all came back to them in horrifically acute detail; those teeth, the claws, it's blinding, yellow eyes. Will remembered hearing it's hiss and restrained a violent shiver as Eleven simply stared at the drawing. Simultaneously, El and Will nodded, rendered speechless amidst their fears.

"Well...no. It didn't really *look* like it..." Will burst in, forcing himself to remember how it's skin was clammy and moist, cloaked in a different color compared to the book's depiction.

"*Whatever*. It can clone itself," Dustin slammed the book shut as the

others absorbed this information. "Sounds like the Displacer Beast to me!"

"-but that's impossible!" Will exclaimed, his brow pinching with fear. He was visibly trembling before all of his friends, refusing to believe what Dustin was hinting at.

"Is it?" Dustin challenged in an equally charged tone. They all shook their heads, Will seemingly ready to cry with this information. He sat distraught, entirely inconsolable. His knees bounced endlessly as he tapped his heels against the carpet.

"...what else did it do?" Mike asked an overwhelmed Will.

He shook his head, sighing curtly, "I-I don't know...it almost got us and I didn't know what else to do. And..." Will's face opened up at something, gazing out into the distance. Mike was so absorbed in his friend's expressions that he quickly jerked his head around to leer over his shoulder. Lucas and Dustin did the same, then returned their gazes to the boy, listening to his words like a sermon. "...I threw the slug at it...you know, the one I puked up from before?" Nancy shot him a lost look, one they easily ignored. "...and, the Displacer Beast just, *tore* it apart." El blinked at this, pursing her lips.

"...then what happened?" Mike demanded, practically on the edge of his seat.

"...it left," Eleven said with a hollow simplicity that surprised them all.

"Yeah..." he chimed in. "...it just, *left*...like *that* was what it wanted the whole time." A silence ensued over the table as they each tried digesting this unreal information, each of them different kinds of pensive and thoughtful.

Suddenly, Nancy pursed her lips, fetching a paper and pen from the corner. She wrote the word **Demogorgon** and underlined it, placing a dash just behind it. "...we know the Demogorgon was attracted to blood," she noted as the boys all leaned in. "...Jonathan and I, we tried killing it...but, I ended up going through some kind of...*tree* and into its home..."

"...the Upside Down," El echoed, eyeing her studiously.

"Yes," Nancy nodded, scribbling onto the paper. "...we know that it traveled alone...and, that it mostly hunted at night...but...I guess if it was hungry enough..."

"...it wouldn't matter," Will finished her thoughts.

Nancy nodded, then wrote the words **Displacer Beast** below the previous monster, "...you said it can clone itself and that it...*ate*, the slug..."

"...and it looks like a jaguar!" Dustin added.

Nancy scribbled the notes down, "...was there...anything else that was different about it?" Will pursed his lips, trying to think of something.

"Yes..." Eleven spoke in a soft soprano that shocked them all. They watched her intently as she blinked back their expressions. "...Upside Down..."

"...I thought you said you *weren't* in the Upside Down!" Lucas rebuked, entirely confused. El pursed her lips, trying to wrap her own mind around it.

"Well...what if they were just...visiting the Upside Down?" Dustin posed a theory, though unsteady and fragile.

"We *weren't* in the Upside Down..." Will said.

"I *know*..." he groaned, reaching out to flip Nancy's paper onto its back. They watched him draw a horizontal line, a stick-figure and a tiny dot with wings. El's eyes widened. *Dustin was onto something.*

"...what is that?" Nancy asked.

With remarkable clarity, Dustin held the drawing up to Nancy. "This, is *our* understanding of the Upside Down," he explained.

"Mr. Clarke drew it for us at Will's funeral...he's a...really smart guy..." Mike narrated, trailing off shyly. Nancy still looked helplessly



confused. "O-Okay, look," he pointed to the line. "That tightrope is the line between our world and the Upside Down."

"...okay..." Nancy nodded.

"**This** is us," he pointed to the stick-figure. "We can't go Upside Down, because, well..." Mike pursed his lips.

"...because of gravity," she surmised.

"Right! It's just...the rules...I guess," Mike trailed off, turning to his curly-haired friend.

Dustin nodded. "But **this** is Eleven," he pointed to the flea. Nancy's brow creased, peering over at the girl. "She can go on both sides because she can shadow-walk...and apparently...so can Will..."

Will pursed his lips, "But I never know when it's gonna happen! It just..." He sighed, closing his eyes disdainfully. "It's only ever happened when I'm asleep...or, if I'm puking up...the slugs..." The group failed to suppress their shudders and grimaces.

Nancy's eyes widened, "...and, how long have you been doing that?"

He pursed his lips, "...since I got back...last year..."

The teenager puzzled over this, very unsettled at Will's sickness, but needing to speak her mind nonetheless. "Well...what if it has something to do with the Demogorgon?"

"It *has* to be," Mike pressed a nervous Will.

Nancy took a moment to collect her words, "What if...the Demogorgon and that *thing* that attacked you are just, competing predators?" They all looked lost. "...in nature, owls of different subspecies aren't supposed to live in the same habitat. They'd *kill* each other because they think they have to...survival of the fittest. They'd have to compete for the same resources, and they just can't do that..." she paused, allowing them to consider this. "...so sometimes... they sneak into each other's nests and throw their eggs out...just for good measure." They all puzzled over this, one of them shaking their heads in refusal.

"...but they *weren't* in the **Upside Down**!" Lucas restated.

Eleven looked like she was about to say something but Mike broke in, "We *know* that!"

"Well then where were they?!" Lucas demanded, his voice raising in frustration.

"GUYS!" Dustin shouted, waving his arms for silence. "They weren't in the Upside Down, but they weren't home either. Their bodies never left, we *get* that. So...what if they were on the *side* of the rope? Remember Mr. Clarke said something about that?" They all sat, basking in the light of this revelation. "Think about it, if they were on the *side* of the rope, they'd be able to see into *both* places. Like, think of all the times Eleven used the radio to find Will in the Upside Down. She never left, she just...*went* there with her mind." Eleven returned their stares, her gaze confident and steady. "It's like...they're just, *projecting* themselves..." Dustin trailed off, pursing his lips at the difficult theory.

"It's not the Upside Down...but it's not home either..." Will sighed. "It's like we were...in-between..."

"...in-between..." Eleven murmured, eyeing Will knowingly.

They all eyed her astoundingly as Dustin applauded, "That's a *perfect* name for it!" Will pursed his lips shyly.

"Yeah! We can call it...the In-Between," Mike smiled Eleven's way, marveling at her seemingly effortless aptitude. "So...when you were ever in the In-Between...could you see people from *our* world?"

She thought back to those tests, those days in the lab with Brenner at her side, asking her to repeat a thousand words too many. The man from the photo, speaking in that strange, choppy, yet flowing tongue she couldn't understand. "Yes," she nodded affirmatively. Everyone's demeanor immediately brightened at this. They were making progress, and Nancy was making a list of the three dimensions they were currently discussing (though she was still a bit uncertain whether the In-Between even counted as an alternate dimension).

"So...does that mean the Displacer Beast can shadow-walk too?" Dustin posed an entirely new question, confounding them all. Nancy pursed her lips, her pen freezing mid-stroke. "*What?* It's a fair question."

Mike sighed with the rest of them, "...I don't know..."

"No..." Eleven said. They watched her point to herself, pressing a finger into her chest as a reference.

Lucas was stumped, "...then how did the Demogorgon get *here*?"

"...the gate..." Mike said, eyeing her searchingly. "You said that you opened it..." She slowly nodded.

Nancy began in a quiet voice, "So...if you opened some kind of portal...then *that* means-"

A thundering noise at their front door and they all flinched, gazing at the stairs confusingly. They were stuck silent for a moment, listening to the barrage of knocks and slams until Mike finally spoke up in an accusing scoff, "It better not be *Steve!*"

"God Mike..." Nancy grimaced, rushing with after him as he plodded up the stairs. El stood, anxious and wanting to follow them as the boys awaited their return.

"What?! I'm just saying...who *else* is crazy enough to come here in the middle of the-" Mike swung open the door, immediately slamming his foot into his mouth as the Chief of Police towered over him. Nancy watched, brow pinched from behind her brother.

"Evening Mike...Nancy..." he struggled to remember their names, grasping at straws until he somehow found them perfectly. "Joyce sent me here to bring Eleven back home."

Mike's brow raised at this and he nearly smirked. *Will's mom is hanging around with the Chief? He'll be allowed to get away with murder! If only Will was bold enough to try it,* he thought, inwardly chuckling. Nancy spoke, "Well, my parents said it was okay if she stays here..."

"No...Joyce wants her home," he stated in a monotone akin to that of

a robot. Mike eyed him suspiciously...something about him didn't bode well for the child. He looked like he was ready to sleep for a week or simply pass out for a day...Mike couldn't decide which one. His jaw was set tight, his lips pressed into a frown.

He watched the siblings exchange a curious glance and his stomach turned, praying for no more questions. "O-Okay...I'll go get her," Nancy offered, stepping back towards the basement.

"Thank you," Hop blinked, his exhaustion nearly consuming him.

"...I-I'm gonna go with you," Mike announced rather awkwardly, following his sister like a lost sheep. Once they were out of earshot, he wrenched his fingers around Nancy's arm, "Nancy!"

"What!?" she demanded in a pointed whisper.

"What if he finds out?! That she's hurt?" Mike asked, his voice equally hushed.

Nancy's eyes widened retrospectively, her brow pinching with an alarming amount of concern. "...I don't know..." she admitted, both of them sharing a lost gaze. They rushed downstairs, their feet bare and cold against the carpet.

"The Chief is here to take El home..." Mike announced, digging around for some clean socks in a laundry basket.

Will grinned at this oddity, "...you mean Hopper?" Mike nodded as Nancy took the girl aside, locking eyes with her as intensely as she dared.

"I know it hurts right now, but you can't let him know you're injured..." Nancy reinforced this truth. El grimaced, nodding hesitantly. She understood the need for this secrecy...but she wasn't sure how she'd get it past Joyce though. That scared her, hiding from Joyce of all people. Eleven got the sense she'd somehow understand, but she wasn't sure about Hop. Nancy simpered as the little girl yawned unabashedly, shivering at her fatigue. "And Eleven..."

"Yes?" she asked, breaking out of the yawn with a word.

"I can teach you how to play piano more tomorrow, if you want. I heard you and Mike playing it before..." she rolled her eyes at him as Mike grinned affectionately.

"Yeah that was horrible..." Lucas shook his head, grinning along with them as Will and Dustin burst into giggles.

"Oh, I'd like to see *you* play it better," Mike challenged, offering Eleven a pair of socks and nodding at his friend. She bent down to put them on and sunk to her knees, wincing at the pain that shot across her back. Nancy and Mike instantly turned back to her, eyes wide with alarm.

"Easy..." Nancy consoled, a steady hand gripping her shoulder.

"Here, let me help you," Mike offered, kneeling down and unfolding the socks. The cuts were healing very well, and there was no more need for her foot bandages. That horrible bruise that had marred her face was entirely gone now, much to Mike's relief.

As the others watched, Lucas knowingly tapped Will on the arm, discreetly gesturing to them and whispering, "Look." Will simply observed the heartwarming exchange as Mike slipped one sock over her left foot, then the other. They smiled at each other as Nancy eyed El's back, worrying about the wounds and her job patching them up.

"Maybe tell Joyce what happened when you get home...just not the Chief..." Nancy suggested.

"Yeah, not unless he stays the night that is," Dustin joked, wiggling his eyebrows at Will Byers. The boy groaned, pretending to vomit into his hand and pushing Dustin back, breaking into a chorus of chortles and laughter. El beamed at them, eyeing Mike warmly.

"There," he said with a note of finality, slipping the last sock on and smiling at her. "...we'll see each other tomorrow, okay?" El was glad he hadn't mentioned the In-Between, knowing they'd have to finish their conversation, but frankly feeling done with the entire matter. She really just wanted to spend more time with them.

"Yes," she nodded, smiling back at him. Her heart was suddenly light

and fluffy again...her face warming up on its own. Her smile dropped – to Mike's confusion – as she stood and nodded absently at him, pursing her lips and turning to go up the stairs. *WHY DID THIS HAPPEN? WHAT ARE THESE FEELINGS?!* She absolutely needed to know.

Mike stood, a little confused. *Um...okay?* "...bye El!"

"Goodnight Mike," she said, halfway up the stairs with Nancy at her side. She wouldn't say goodbye to him...never again. It was something she just couldn't do, like eating peanuts when you had an allergy. It was an option...but it was wiser for her not to take it. She subconsciously slipped her hand into Nancy's as they walked towards the door, and upon realizing she'd done this, she *tore* it away and eyed her alarmingly. "...s-sorry," she stammered.

"It's okay," Nancy consoled. "I'm glad you're better now...*I* should really be apologizing for accidentally hurting you so much..."

El watched her grit her teeth, feeling a draft wash over them and into the kitchen. Nancy had been thrust into the thick of things and she'd carried herself well, helping the girl more than any of the boys could. She had turned out just fine. "...thank you," Eleven said, genuinely smiling at the girl.

"Oh!" Nancy raised her brow at this and waved a dismissive hand. "No problem! It's...what friends do for each other." El turned this well-known concept around in her tired mind, taking extra care to include Nancy whenever she listed of her closest friends from now on.

Hopper could hear them talking in the den. *He's almost out of time...* it kept beating the back of his brain. He slammed his hand onto the door-frame, knocking three times over. The girls jumped, creeping out into the moonlight as Hopper opened the backseat car door for the girl. It was Joyce's green car, and the scent of smoke still lingered in the cabin, comforting and redolent. Something in his mind writhed in agony, replaying his multiple encounters with Brenner's men and feeling his hand clasping the edge of the door, betraying his words and feelings. Eleven hugged Nancy goodbye, then crawled into the backseat, trying to hide her discomfort. Hopper shut the door,

"Alright...thanks for that." His words were low and sleep-like as he sat behind the wheel, shutting his door and turning the key. The engine roared to life and Nancy watched them drive away, that curious face peering back at her from the rear-view window. Nancy waved, some odd sense of uncertainty finding her in the night and clashing horrendously with her stomach, causing it to lurch about. She was too tired to chase the feeling, stepping into the safety of her house and closing their front door, locking it behind her.

Halfway down a neighborhood street, Hopper slowed the car to a stop and flicked off the engine. Eleven peered about at the dark houses, eyeing the telephone wires high above them when Hop suddenly said, "I need you to sit up here." Her eyes widened at this and she blinked, obligingly climbing over the module and slipping into the passenger seat. Despite her pain, a hint of excitement played across her face, having never ridden in the *front* of a car before. Her new perspective suddenly seemed so much broader, until Hop turned to face her, his countenance solemn and stoic. "I need you to listen... okay?" he began in a low, stern voice that made her brow lower instinctively. Eleven mutely nodded, realizing something was very amiss. "...one of my officers is injured and he needs blood. If you give him your blood, he might live."

Eleven was dumbfounded at this, her brow raising worriedly...give *him* blood? She hadn't been aware you could give people your blood...not until now anyways. "...if I don't?" she asked.

"...he'll die," Hopper stated hollowly. "You both have the same blood type...you're the only person I know right now who can help him...I wouldn't ask otherwise..." Eleven peered off to the side, unable to grasp the capacity of it. Then Hopper said, "...it's a matter of life or death." El's gaze opened up at this almost mechanically, a tint of pale fear coating her skin. This matter was beyond her comprehension, yet Hop was still bringing it to her attention, just as Joyce had said. And suddenly, Hop thought she might cry. She turned around to gaze longingly through the back window, undoubtedly thinking of her friends. Hop sighed, rubbing his mouth with the corner of his hand, "...I shouldn't have told you..." *How foolish of him...of course she wouldn't want to. She doesn't know Cal; it wasn't Joyce or Mike he was talking about. They were estranged parties coming together for the first*

time. Hop shook his head, "...I'm just gonna bring you home."

She watched him turn the ignition, felt the car rumble awake as he switched it into gear. The sadness pooling in the blue of his eyes was endless...*did he feel that this was his fault?!* She already understood that feeling; it was a stinging sore that leaked regret and sorrow, a pain Eleven wouldn't wish on her greatest enemy. *Well...that part was still debatable*, but Hop had no place experiencing this pain...she could tell by the way his eyes stared blank, a lack of focus leading him astray. "Yes," she said at the last second, just as the car began rolling forwards. Hop pressed his toe into the brake, jolting them to a painful stop and watched her subdue a grimace. His eyes were disbelieving, as if he hadn't heard her correctly. "I'll do it..." she deliberately nodded, her eyes sharing his sadness as if Hop and her were the dearest of friends grieving over a lost soul.

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: I was going to leave one at the beginning too but I'll just sum it all up here. Okay...GUYS. For those of you who have been following this story from the very start (which is...probably *all* of you since it'd be weird to just skip chapters) I *sincerely* thank you. I KNOW that your lives are **busy** and you have other stuff going on, so I **apologize** for how long you have to wait from chapter to chapter. My schedule has been all *kinds* of unpredictable as of late. But, to be honest, when I write with these amazing characters the Duffer Brothers created...I take my time because I **respect** their creations. I want to depict them correctly and...I just think they deserve the patience I have allotted them whenever I'm adding dialogue or facial expressions or thoughts or whatever. Again, I apologize for the wait; I've been *super* busy and writing this chapter was *very* hard. I had to read through it SO MANY TIMES and each time I kept finding little things I could change. But this is it! This is the final product, I...I-I ***can't go through it anymore. I think my eyeballs are gonna fall out. SO I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY!***

I'm kidding I'm kidding...but **seriously**. I really hope you guys like what you're reading. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for taking the time to wait for the continued updates and leaving me comments and everything, it means a lot.



Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*

## 27. Broken Men

### Chapter Twenty-Seven - Broken Men

Hopper couldn't believe he was going through with this. An urgency clung to him in a humming cloud, and each time he reminded himself where they were headed, the reality nearly escaped him. He could hear Joyce's motherly voice, distinct and loud, echoing in the back of his brain cavity...a constant reminder of his desperation. "...when's the last time you ate something?" he asked the small girl. Eleven had been correct in her assumptions; sitting in the front of a moving vehicle was *definitely* more exciting than sitting in the back. She could see *so much more* up here! Hop was tempted to ask her to switch seats – for safety's sake – but he saw her eyes light up in marvel at the world around her and decided against it. Despite how tired she was and the random back pains, she focused on containing her excitement and responding to Hop's question.

El eyed the clock, *eleven thirty-four*. She counted back through the hours, trying to make the best guesstimate, "...eight..." She didn't really understand why it mattered.

Hop sighed, pursing his lips and nodding, "Alright..." They were on route towards Hawkins General, but Hop knew a slight detour they could take to grab some food...well, *snack* food anyway (he didn't have that much cash on him). He hoped the place was still open. Hop needed to keep her as discreet as possible...but wherever they ended up going, he couldn't leave her alone in the car either. Recent events had him looking over his shoulder like a schizophrenic. They turned onto the road leading towards the center of town. He was *positive* she wouldn't be opposed to this...she would need all the energy she could muster, and he would need a moment to harbor some peace of mind. Hop was going to have to lie about who she was to everyone who saw her – for *their* protection – without rousing any suspicions. Only then would there be the *smallest* chance of success. The Chief was entirely prepared to bring her home to Joyce at the drop of a hat...it was the outcome he most expected. But that also meant leaving his fellow officer, unconscious and pale in the emergency room. *Hang on Cal*...he drove faster, ignoring the speed limits *he* was tasked with

enforcing.

A sudden breeze startled him from his thoughts, piercing and forceful. Eleven had rolled down her window, jumped at the barrage of winds and promptly rolled it back up...but Hop could tell by the way her fingers lingered *just* around the lever and how her eyes stared wondrously through the glass that she was likely to do it again. He pursed his lips, refusing to be drawn into her infinite curiosity despite its childlike innocence. And sure enough, without missing a beat, El opened the window a second time, grinning to herself and rolling it up, then down, then back up again. Several moments went by like this as separated blasts of air tickled her scalp, carelessly tossing Hop's hair about every other second. He bit his lip and tensed his jaw, wishing he had his hat on. *What did I sign up for...?* Seemingly bored with the physics of a moving car combined with the mechanics of the window, she closed it a final time, gazing about the cabin. Her eyes lighted on the radio, broadening in recognition. He could see her gaze up at him for a second, some sort of wonder behind those bright hazel eyes, then return her attention to the radio.

Just when he thought she was finished with her escapades, static filled the cabin as the radio switched on, changing frequencies **all** by itself! *Queen* instantly filled the tiny atmosphere, "Bohemian Rhapsody" sending agreeable shivers through her nerves.

*-open your eyes...look up to the skies and see...*

Hop's eyes broadened with alarm, and he nearly slammed into his brakes until he saw *her*, squinting at the dial in a determined fashion. Those first few lyrics seeped into the confined space; a man stretching his words alongside a couple of other strange, jubilant sounds, harmonizing along a tumbling rhythm that made El's neck tingle. She recognized the distinct *ding* of the piano...though it rang with a different intent. She did not smile, there was some kind of undertone to this. Eleven forced herself to focus in on this man's words...he was *obviously* telling them a story. She'd meant to find Nancy's song, maybe show it to Hop...but this was something entirely different.

*...I'm just a poor boy...I need no sympathy...because I'm-*

-easy come...easy go...little high...little low...

Hop sat, an astounded witness to this unnerving display, uninvited chills coursing across his body. He wanted to reach over and flick the power off...*she shouldn't be using her powers like that!* Hop subconsciously tightened his jaw as the song continued mesmerizing El, flicking his eyes over to check on her, fighting hard to maintain his aloofness. It wasn't that he didn't care for the child...he just couldn't bring himself to share in her sporadic joy and unbridled curiosity. Still, as the song played, Hop found it that much harder *not* to become invested.

...*Mama...just killed a man...put a gun against his head, pulled my trigger; now he's dead...*El was reeling with thoughts, blinking slow and deliberate, her eyes never leaving the radio.

...*Mama...life had **just** begun...*she thought of Joyce, swallowing her nerves and closing her eyes.

...*but now I've gone and thrown it all **away**...*Hop inhaled deeply, tightening his grip on the wheel. *Why did it have to be **this** song...?*

...***Mama...***now they *both* thought of Joyce, struggling in their heated silence.

...*didn't mean to make you cry...if I'm not back again **this time tomorrow**...carry on...carry on...as if nothing really matters...*El's brow pinched at the startling way his words clung to her...incessant reminders of their task at hand. She wanted to cry, but he sang with an indifference that shocked her into an unusual demeanor. The piano played along, a fiercely devoted melody backing the words with enormous amounts of emotion, and Hop knew what was coming. He couldn't tell what urged him to keep it playing; he only knew that a piece of him was singing to these lyrics as well, like old stolen rum from his past.

*Too late...my time has come...sends **shivers** down my spine; body's **aching** all the **time**. Goodbye, everybody...I've **got** to go...*

...*gotta **leave** you all behind and **face** the **truth**...*the drums shook her heart, the piano squeezing her brain.

*...Mama...I don't wanna die...I sometimes wish I'd never been born at all...* El eyed Hop nervously amidst the fantastic noise, his words getting to both of them as they tried hiding this indisputable fact from the other. "You wanna turn it off?" Hop asked, his eyes glued determinedly to the road.

The piano began bouncing delicately, foreshadowing some greater impact ahead. A tiny part of Eleven was actually frightened by this music...*just earlier he was singing about Mama killing someone!* But she could *feel* something was bound to happen, and she *yearned* to know how his story ended. So, she replied with a soft shake of her head, "...no."

Hop pursed his lips, squinting into the blinding headlights of an approaching vehicle. The midnight side of a Ford teased his peripheral, then disappeared in the exact same moment. As *Bohemian Rhapsody* began to intensify, striking El with every chord like a sucker-punch straight to the chest, Hop's heart nearly stopped, jerking his head to the side and glaring at the frame of the passing car. Boxy and stylish...his pulse quickened and his hands went cold. He gripped the wheel tighter, peering into the rear-view mirror like a predator. El was oblivious to Hop's disturbance, staring open-mouthed at the radio as it continued to send chills along her scalp. Each impact made her even more speechless, and she couldn't tell if she wanted to smile, laugh, hide or cry. So she sat, unblinking and gaping at the wonderful chords drifting along the air. Hop spotted the Ford's taillights suddenly glow red, braking for some unknown reason other than to drive a nail into his sanity. Their stomachs lurched in unison as the voices reached higher and higher along the register. Hop eyed the speedometer as it reached fifty. Suddenly, a pair of headlights tailed behind him, flashing bright in his mirrors. It was too dark to tell if they belonged to the black Ford he'd seen, and the blinding headlights didn't help in the least. Adrenaline started to fill his veins and he pressed his toe into the gas.

Eleven's eyes widened as she gripped the edge of the seat, the force of the car pulling her back as Hopper sped on towards the gas station. *Maybe if he just made it there...they'd be safe.* The lever on the speedometer peaked sixty, sixty-five...it was just about to reach seventy but a turn was coming up. He wordlessly eased his toe into

the brake pedal, preparing to turn, anxiously waiting for those headlights to follow him around the bend. His blue eyes flicked down to the dial. Forty...thirty...twenty-five. It was slow enough, and Hop turned right, forcing El to grip the seat and wince at the pain. Still, she sat in utter astonishment as the song came to a close, the progression ramping down considerably. To Hop's amazement...the car behind them traveled on in a straight line. He saw its side in his rearview mirror, watching with baited breath as the black Ford ignored them, going on its way in either obliviousness or blatant ignorance. *Or...it was really just someone else's car.* Hop hadn't considered this.

*...nothing really matters...anyone can see...*

*...nothing really matters...*

*...nothing really matters...to me...*

The car shifted slightly as they rolled into a parking lot. El grimaced as her back inadvertently pressed into the seat. Thankfully, he hadn't noticed her pain just yet. Hop waited for the song to die down before switching the ignition off.

*...any way the wind blows...the car growled into silence.*

"Alright..." he exhaled, turning to face her. Eleven's eyes were wide with shock, seemingly stunned and dumbfounded. "Well...that's *Queen* for you..." Hop noted, peering about at the empty parking lot. Eleven blinked, sensing he wasn't sure of something, like he was simultaneously juggling a thousand ideas and merely going with the flow of life quite ungracefully; she found this to be astoundingly relatable, suddenly wanting nothing more than to express this in some way, her brow creasing thoughtfully. After a moment's patience, he finally focused on her. "...wait here," Hop instructed with a down-turned finger. She nodded, pursing her lips halfheartedly, still struggling with the patience it took to hide from the world for so long.

The car shifted at the loss of his weight and he stood, peering into the darkness of night. Every shadow lay as a haunting reminder of what he was hiding from, and his throat felt like it was closing and drying

up all at once. Rectangles of light threw themselves invitingly from the gas station windows and onto the pavement; Hop knew they could be minutes from closing. *This is going to piss them off.* After taking a minuscule moment to consider the workers' schedules, he rolled his eyes and shrugged, opening his door and beckoning her with a hand, "Let's go." El crawled over the seats as Hop stood, surveying their surroundings like a hawk. "Come on..." he waved her close as she padded over in her grey-toed socks, guiding her by the shoulder and walking her inside. El's feet hit smooth, white-tiled floors as Hop led her to an isolated corner. He turned, "Wait here. I'll be back." Reluctantly, she nodded just as a man came peering around the corner of a shelf. Hop's only warning was the way El's face opened up in shock, realizing they'd been seen.

"...Jim?"

A shock-wave of chills burst through his blood as he turned, only to spot an old friend standing close by, eyeing him a tad suspiciously. "...Joe!" he sighed with relief. The off-duty pharmacist chuckled a little nervously.

"Hey!" he waved a hello, eyeing the girl warmly. He knew this wasn't Sarah...the whole town would've known that. He simply assumed she was under Hop's care...though, the closer he looked, the more confused he got. *Where were her, shoes...? A-And her hair?* Eleven marveled at the way his brown eyes twinkled, though by now, she'd become aware that looks could be deceiving. Her hazel orbs stared back with a glimmer of off-putting reservation and Joe thought... *what is wrong with this child?* He promptly refocused his attention on Jim, who was currently gripping the child's shoulder in a protective manner. Those blue eyes were *beyond* tired, that gaze trepidatious and uncertain. "...so, what's new Hop?"

"Nothing...we're just, grabbing a snack..." he said in a meek tone that made Joe suspicious. But then he chuckled, knowing this was where Hopper *always* went to satisfy the occasional sweet tooth...like the cheapskate he was (candy here was still fifty cents). With a quick turn of his head, Jim led the girl towards the counter. There were no other customers...only a single man staring on, wearing that disconcerting, confused expression as his eyes trailed over the small girl. Eleven stared back, unashamed and seemingly just as

confounded, if not *more* so. "Go ahead and pick whatever you want," Hop waved a blind hand towards the candy shelf, peering out into the parking lot. It was easy to see Joyce's green Pinto in the night... *but how well would a black Ford blend in with the darkness?*

"...Jim?"

"Yeah?" Hop turned to see Joe, approaching him like someone would a caged animal, slow and cautious. He also had a couple snacks in his hand and walked up to the counter to checkout. They stood directly beside one another.

"...is everything okay?" he asked, occasionally eyeing the small girl as she sorted through the selections. Hop hated when this happened. *Of course he could trust Joe...* he'd known him since he'd moved here, and they'd become fast friends. There wasn't a doubt about him...Joe could keep more than a couple secrets over a drink or two...but Hop *would not* allow it. If Joe knew, it would put the town's best pharmacist in mortal danger, and as Chief of Police (and Joe's friend) Hop didn't feel like taking advantage of his accepting nature. So he would go on lying...to *protect* those around him.

"...yeah," Hop said after a slight pause, burrowing his hands into his pockets. He could see Joe eyeing the girl, glaring suspicion surrounding those pupils. Right now, he was looking at her feet... shoe-less but covered. He gazed back up at Jim, shooting him a questioning glance. "...she just got back from a sleepover...left her shoes in the car," he covered in a sleep-deprived voice. Eleven was – for once – oblivious to their conversations, *entirely* absorbed in the colorful wrappers and pictures. Her fingers trailed over each one like a scanner, occasionally lighting down to test the plastic. The clerk waited, tapping the counter in an awkward rhythm that made El glare up at him dangerously. He immediately stopped tapping.

"I heard about what happened today...with one of your officers..." Joe began, his brow pinching empathetically. Hop pursed his lips, his gaze intensifying as Joe paused, trying to offer some form of consolation. He shook his head, "I'm so sorry Jim..."

Hop sighed, trying to ignore the overwhelming urge to pour his heart out and relinquish every one of his secrets to his dear friend, "...it's



fine. There's still a chance for him." Subconsciously, he gazed down at the girl, who was hefting multiple candy bars into her arms like a bandit. "...there's still a chance..." he repeated it in a daze.

"...there is?" Joe prompted, his voice optimistically bright. He was writing his information onto a strip of receipt tape, a brown paper bag sitting atop the counter, full of his purchases.

With a sigh, Hop directed his attention elsewhere, specifically to a magazine rack. His fingers traced the bold letters on the front of *Time Magazine*, seemingly reminding himself to answer Joe's rhetoric. "...there could be..." *Time's running out.*

"Well..." the man trailed off, nodding solemnly and finishing with, "...t-that's great news!" He grasped the paper bag and offered him a hopeful smile.

"Yeah...it is..." Hop echoed, his voice stale and somber, devoid of any pitch or emotion. Joe pursed his lips, sampling Hop's stomach-turning anguish and rubbing the clean-shaven surface of his face. Eleven suddenly straightened up, ignoring a slight pain and holding the candy close to her.

She eyed the man, not a tad sheepish at the ridiculous amount of candy she'd chosen. Hop raised his brow at her disbelievingly. Without saying anything, Eleven simply watched Hopper, as if to say, *I'm ready to leave now.* Joe fought back a wide smile, but it showed, curling the edges of his lips like a long mustache as he covered most of his mouth with a closed fist. His eyes did *all* the smiling, and a disheartened Jim could see and *feel* the warmth coming off this man. It still wasn't enough to calm his racing nerves. He felt he couldn't savor anything, not food nor pleasant conversations...and he *certainly* knew he didn't have the energy to argue with her. Despite Joe's comfortable demeanor, the longer he peered down at Eleven, the more anxious Hop became.

Eventually he sighed, peering at the clerk tiredly, "...can you ring these up for us?" The clerk nodded, unsmiling, watching the girl like an alien. Hop pursed his lips and took the candy from her – upon which she was *very* confused – and placed the armful onto the counter. The clerk eyed Hop for a second, watching as the man

reached for a pack of Altoids and added it to the pile. Hop challenged his glare, "...what?"

"N-No...very good," the clerk mumbled, beginning to scan the items with a sheepish expression. Eleven watched him tap onto a clunky looking machine that made a strange noise at each press of a button. It **demanded** her attention, so she craned her neck to get a better look at it. This drew the man's eye to her and she lowered back onto her heels a little shyly. The clerk rolled his eyes and went on scanning the items, and El peered over at Joe. When he smiled at the girl, she almost didn't know how to react. He was so jolly and blindly accepting...*like Benny*. Suddenly she felt like crying, swallowing a bundle of nerves and warily staring back at him.

That dreaded question suddenly presented itself, "...so...who's this you have with you today?"

Eleven and the Chief exchanged worried glances as Hop struggled to arrange his thoughts. For a heart-stopping moment, Joe awaited a reply, eyeing Hop quite suspiciously. Then the girl nodded his way in a polite manner, saying in a quiet voice, "...E-Eleanor..."

Joe beamed at her, nodding in acknowledgement of this. He spoke, "...it's good to meet you Eleanor." As Hop was dumbfounded into some kind of silence, fishing in his wallet for some cash, Eleven nodded, reluctantly looking back up to Jim in an expectant signal. Hop eyed her, discreetly nodding as that face told him, *it's time to go*.

"...alright..." Hop planted a few crumpled green papers onto the counter, watching the clerk count the sheets. "Hey...thanks for all your help Joe. I'm telling you...you're doing God's work over there..." Eleven flinched as the clerk opened up the loud machine with a bang and a swoosh of the cash drawer.

"Oh...no no no..." Joe politely declined this compliment, beaming in a humble manner. "See...they *need* me to do it because I just happen to know how. I got *talked* into it," he joked, eyeing the Chief with a broad grin on his face.

Hop chuckled back, "...yep...that's how they get 'ya." He felt like digging for a cigarette, maybe even offering one to Joe (he was

feeling especially generous) but thought better of it. He wasn't even sure if a guy like Joe smoked at all, and he *knew* you weren't supposed to smoke at gas stations. The clerk nervously pressed a paper bag to the edge of the counter and Eleven took it with both hands, holding his gaze a little awkwardly. Hop noticed this, nodded a thanks to the unsettled man, then began nervously guiding her to the door. "Have a good night Joe!" he called halfway towards Joyce's vehicle.

"Stay safe Jim!" Joe called, waving them off good-naturedly.

As Hop and Eleven climbed into the car, he turned to her, shutting his door with a slam. At first she thought he was angry for some reason and she grew quite tense. But then he sighed, nodding in an impressed manner. "...good job in there," he complimented her quick thinking, his lips ghosting a smile as the car roared to life. She smiled gratefully, peering down into the brown paper bag of goodies. Watching Hopper buckle himself in, she mimicked his action, pulling the belt across her frame and locking it into place. "Always do that when you get into a car, no matter **what**," he instructed, his words coming out of nowhere and without warning. She turned, gazing up at him with questioning eyes.

"...why?"

He sighed a little impatiently, "It's a seat belt...it's supposed to keep you safe in case of an accident..." El squinted her eyes at him.

"...an accident?" They rolled on towards Hawkins General, high beams casting before them in rays of white light.

"Yeah..." Hop trailed off, rubbing his brow with a tired hand. Eleven sensed he was done speaking for a while, so she reached into the bag and extracted a Reese's peanut butter cup. Tearing it open, her eyes widened at the tantalizing aroma, barely detectable unless you leant in to smell it (which she had done with great emphasis). Hop's brow pinched downwards at her, watching her put the cup into her mouth and savor the almost overwhelming sweetness dance across her tongue. Something prickled at the back of his brain, puzzling him to no end. He watched her chew the food, her eyes closed in sublime ease...and then he remembered. *WHAT IF SHE'S ALLERGIC?* Hop

couldn't remember leaving her any peanut-based foods in the box, so there was no telling! Suddenly, Hop's heart leapt into his throat.

His eyes snapped wide as he watched her pick out the second cup to eat. The world seemed to move in slow-motion as the car slowed to a stop. Without warning, he *grabbed* her wrist, the chocolate leaping from her fingers and tumbling to the floor. Eleven froze, watching him cautiously, one cheek full of the sweetest thing she'd ever tasted, her eyes wide with shock. Then, he leant in and asked in a very serious tenor, "...how do you *feel*?" Taking a moment to collect herself – and to continue breathing – she finished chewing, blinking in momentary relief. He suddenly felt the need to narrow down this odd question, watching her chew the candy. "Does your throat itch?" His words were laced with stress and a sternness that deeply perturbed her.

As her eyes locked with his, her brow lowering quite incredulously, she shook her head, swallowing the candy. "...no."

"Okay..." he seemed to calm down at this, though he knew the side-effects could take several minutes to flare up. Eleven was hopelessly confused, her stare piercing and lost. "...just let me know if you start feeling sick or itchy..." he said in a drawn-out sigh, rubbing his forehead and continuing on down the street. El's lips were almost magnetically sealed at this point, unable to find some comforting statement to ease the stressful atmosphere. So – a bit more meekly – she sifted through the assorted candies, flicking her eyes in Hop's direction as if he were an irritated tiger. After a whole minute of no response, he breathed easy, slowly digesting the fact that Eleven *probably wasn't* allergic to peanuts.

She waited for the car to come to a stop in the parking lot, chewing a plain Hershey's bar and savoring it. When Hop sighed she tensed slightly, half-expecting him to knock another piece out of her hand. Hop was finally breathing somewhat easy, leaning back into his seat and rubbing his oily forehead. Through his fingers he saw El's silhouette gently reflected in the windshield as she sat up, gazing out at the large, structured hospital. It loomed ominous and foreboding against the night sky, the moon peering around one of its uppermost corners. "Alright...we're here..." Hop unbuckled, reaching across to unbuckle her belt. It retracted into itself and Hop waited...but she

did not move. He peered at her, his patience worn thin until he recognized that look of fear just hinting her brow, creasing it almost unnoticeably. She heard him sigh, heavy and thick, "Look..." Their eyes met in the shadows, hers showing him that glimmer of vulnerability for the first time. "I'll do all the talking...I just need you to follow my lead," he instructed. Her gaze flitted down, and he could see she was unconvinced, so he turned to face her directly. "...hey."

"...what?" she asked, peering up at him worriedly.

"...I know it looks bad...but it isn't. This is a *hospital*. People go here to get better...it's not like that place," he watched her exhale through her nostrils, pursing her lips and trying to fight back that choking anxiety. It rang familiar with him and for once, he felt a connection to the girl, new yet reminiscently old...he couldn't quite place it. All he knew was that she was scared...*and rightly* so. This place was probably *the* most comparable building to Hawkins Lab she's ever seen. "...you don't have to do this," he finally reminded her after a moment of thickening silence. El peered up at him, her eyes twinkling in the dark. It was like she was fighting *so hard* not to cry, placing an enormous strain on her open face, creasing it memorably into one of the saddest things Hop had ever seen. "...I can bring you to Joyce right now...just say the word."

El pursed her lips, gazing disdainfully at the building to her left. *It's a matter of life or death*...his words came back to her like ghosts from her past as an imperception rooted itself between them, deep and incorrigible, and yet...she felt a moral obligation to do this for him. Eleven didn't understand the formalities concerning their blood types or even what the procedure involved...what she *could* comprehend was him *willingly* braving the Upside Down to save Will and bring him back, *alive*. To brave the wilderness and bring *her* back to the place she called home, to the people she loved. She definitely owed him...though this seemed a hefty price. For a second, Mike was all she could think about, and the guilt tore across her chest like claws toiling the dry soil. She inhaled, trying to steady her racing heart, "...no."

Hop watched her, his brow lowering just a tad. "...you want to go through with this?"

Eleven closed her eyes and nodded, "...yes."

"Are you *sure*?" he checked, his eyes turning sad just looking at her.

Eleven breathed deep, nodding after a moment and answering with more finality, "...yes."

"Okay," he breathed, peering over his shoulder and into the windows of the building. He turned back to her, "Stay close to me." Eleven obligingly nodded, making her way over the seat and stepping onto the pavement. Hop peered down at her feet, toes wriggling against the cold and he sighed. *Couldn't they have sent her with shoes...?* Silently, he walked beside her, many heads higher and peering about in a paranoid fashion. Her steps were careful and timid, the building looming closer and taller until they were finally stepping into its borders. Again, her feet were on that favored, white-tile surface she slid so easily on. Nurses and hospital staff alike stared in awe at the little girl, concern pitting in all their stomachs and washing across their faces. Hop approached another counter, "Hey...how's he doing?" There seemed to be a rapport between the two, for the woman to know who Hop was talking about and be able to answer as quickly as she did.

A receptionist by the name of Rosa – Hop took a second to glance down at her name-tag – replied, "...I'm afraid he's not well...his body is fighting hard to replenish itself, but it's taking a toll on his immune system..."

"...is there still time to donate?" Hop cut in, his words wrought with haste. El could feel his anxiousness filling the room, inadvertently drawing everyone's eyes to them, and then to her.

Rosa's brow creased and she peered over the counter at the curious little girl. Her eyes were wide and hazel. "...you want, *her* to donate?"

"Yes..." he stammered, sighing into his hand. "She's...s-she's *family*. Cal's niece...she's the *only one* who shares his blood type..." Rosa's gaze deepened as she pursed her lips. "...she just wants him to be okay..." Hop played on, hoping it was enough. El peered about at the walls and ceilings, eyeing the people in scrubs and fighting the mounting panic she felt welling within her. The woman took another

look at the girl, her eyes suspicious and questioning.

"...and where are her parents?" El's ears perked at the familiar-sounding word.

"They'll be here soon...their car broke down on the way; said they wanted me to bring her in their place..." Hop lied in a suave tenor, inwardly choking on his own words. Miraculously enough, Rosa sighed in defeat. "...he doesn't have much time, does he?" Hop asked, discreetly nudging El's shoulder from behind the counter.

Rosa sighed again, "...no. No he doesn't..." Hop exhaled, peering down at a *miserable*-looking Eleven as she knit her brow in *the* most convincing expression possible. A part of him suddenly wondered if she was even acting; her face seemed to manifest every twinge of sadness he couldn't feel himself. The woman noticed the girl and slightly leant over the counter, "Oh, but I'm *sure* he's going to pull through! You just have to have faith sweetie..."

Eleven's frown transformed into a fierce glare that sent unpredicted chills up Rosa's spine. "...is there any way she can donate now?" Hop asked, deciphering El's frightening glower for the flustered woman.

Rosa stammered a moment, "I..." She peered back down at El – who was maintaining her tired stare – and sighed deeply. "...I-I suppose so...but you'll need to stay with her during the process."

"That's fine," Hop shook his head, his heart palpitating with an unforeseen excitement. They watched Rosa pick up a phone and speak into it, undoubtedly asking for admission into somewhere. *Had it worked? Was this **really** going to happen?*

The woman set the phone into the receiver and pointed down a hall, "Go through those doors and make a left. Someone will be waiting for you."

"*Thank you,*" Hop said, taking the girl's hand. It was probably the most genuine thing he'd said to her all night. "Come on, let's go," he prompted, rushing down the hall with Eleven trailing close behind. Once they were through the doors, men and women in white coats were all they could see, and El skid to a stop, blinking in horror at

these familiar-looking people. Hop turned down a hall, nearly missing the girl frozen in place far behind him, but he sidestepped back into view, gazing at her dubiously. She was trembling, breathing faster than normal and slowly treading backwards, deliberately retreating from this wing of the hospital. Hop's eyes locked on her as he paced close, gripping her shoulder, "Hey..." Both of them were reeling back at startlingly fresh memories, overcome with what each of them was witnessing. El blinked, shaking her head and fighting the urge to run. Several doctors slowed down, eyeing the two inquisitively. Each one of their stares ice-picked into El's brain as a red flag, telling her to race back to Mike or Joyce's house...*anywhere* but here.

"Bad..." she whispered, her voice pitching upwards with timid nuance. Their outfits haunted Eleven, suddenly bringing everything Hop had told her into question. She regarded him suspiciously, her eyes stern and demanding. His stomach writhed with guilt.

"Listen, listen..." he gripped her shoulder tighter, fighting back a meltdown of his own. "...it's *not* them. They're not here...these are *doctors*..." he trailed off in a hopeless sigh. "...they're the good guys." El pursed her lips, gritting her teeth in uncertainty. She already knew what doctors were and what their jobs entailed...they were a *huge* part of her old life, keeping her generally healthy and – for the most part – immunized. "*Look...the sooner* we get this over with, the sooner you can see Joyce..." Hop reasoned, trying to comfort her with that damn relative term and those empty promises. *Please calm down*...he silently prayed, unable to watch another child crack open like this.

"Something wrong?" a doctor approached him as he crouched before the small girl.

Hop turned to scowl up at him, "Everything's *fine*...she just, doesn't like hospitals..." In truth, *he* was the one who hated this place, it's mere scent bringing him back to that horrible time long ago. El eyed Hop accusingly, sweat clinging to her skin as she tried to fight past the choking feeling in her throat. Her ears tingled, picking up every hollow footstep, every stapler *click*, every beeping machine there was to hear in this frighteningly sterile place.



"Ah...I see," the man nodded comprehensibly as Hop reached down to take her hand. She tore hers from it, shaking her head at him and backtracking out of fear.

Hop sighed, *mining* within himself to try and ease her quivery breaths. "Look...just try to breathe deeper, okay? In through your nose, out through your mouth..." Eleven tried it, and it worked wonders, her stress departing her with every shaky exhale. The doctor watched on, quite impressed and smiling warmly. "That's it..." Hop sighed, relaxing with her as she collected herself.

"...w-were you trying to find something?" the man spoke again, his hair brown and thick. He had a beard – the likes of which Hop respected – and creamy white skin, accompanied with eyes of dark brown.

"Yeah...we're trying to make a blood donation for Officer Callahan..." Hop explained, standing to his full height, cradling El's hand in his own. She peered about at the coated men, telling herself not to think of them as bad...*trying* to get the memories to leave her alone.

"Oh! I'm your guy!" he extended a hand, smiling broadly. "The name's Richard. Nice to meet you!"

Hop's lips almost refused to smile, seemingly too exhausted to even try, but he took Richard's hand. "Chief Jim Hopper."

"Oh!" he raised his brow. "Glad I met you here and not out there! You probably would've caught me speeding once or twice..." Richard joked good-naturedly, peering down at Eleven. "And who's this?"

"Um...this is...E-Eleanor..." Hop trailed off, biting his lip awkwardly. "She's...Callahan's niece..."

Richard smiled down at her, "Well, let me just tell *you* how happy I am to see you today!" El's brow raised, blinking absently at the man. She immediately found it that much harder to trust him. "How old are you?"

*How long had it been?* Eleven couldn't tell...so she went with the number Papa had assigned her on her last birthday. "...eleven..." she

mumbles in a subdued voice.

Richard eyed her a little questioningly until Hopper confirmed, "S-She's eleven..." It sounded weird on his tongue...saying her name like that. *Ugh...she should've said twelve.* He suddenly wished he had her birth certificate with him, but he'd left it at Joyce's. She'd vowed to hide it somewhere until they returned. Thoughts of home made his legs sore and achy, his eyes begging for sleep, and Eleven wasn't faring much better.

"Wow! *Only* eleven?!You're so *brave* for eleven years old!" Richard enthused. Hop pursed his lips, peering around at the onlookers and wishing for them to get on with their business. Eleven did not smile... everything about him was too foreign to her. She didn't know if she could trust him yet...not like Joyce or even Hop. Richard extended a welcoming hand, "Right this way." Hop followed him down a hall, holding Eleven close. Their journey ended in a small and unassuming examination room. Hopper gestured for her to sit in the chair beside him, so she did. Her hand hadn't left his yet...he didn't ask why or refuse it. Richard went about collecting the required items: an empty blood bag, the needle, some tubing, and a vial. The clock ticked so loudly that it scratched against Hop's psyche with each passing second. Eleven found it quite bothersome as well, eyeing it tiredly and huffing through her nose. She thought about breaking it but suddenly Richard was crouching before her, prepping a *needle*. El's mouth fell open and a tiny gasp met Hop's ears. *Not needles*, she thought. ***Anythingbut needles...***

Noticing this discreet distress, Hop gripped her hand a little tighter, eyeing Richard. "...don't you have to test it first?"

"...well, we *always* test any blood we get. But we can only do that after we take it," Richard assured him, unsheathing the thin point. "It'll just save time this way," he added. Hop entirely understood that. *Time was of the essence.* "Which arm should I stick?" Richard joked a little too casually, turning Eleven's stomach rather violently.

Hop eyed her patiently. "...r-right," she prompted, though she did not extend either of her arms in the least. With a nod, Richard gingerly slid up the girl's sleeve and wrapped his fingers around El's right wrist, and of course, she *impulsively* recoiled, jerking her arm away to

glare at him accusingly.

Hop pursed his lips as Richard chuckled, "...not a big fan of needles, are we?" El returned a steady gaze, wide-eyed and cautious...a little threatening even. The doctor blinked back in silent amazement. "...do you want me to get someone or...?" he trailed off, gesturing to the hall with his eyes. It wasn't the first time he'd had to hold down a child for their shots, and it certainly wouldn't be the last. Of course, he had to keep in mind that she was *willingly* giving her blood. Richard simply didn't have the emotional capacity for donors who suddenly changed their minds at the last second.

Hop's brow creased as El shot him a pleading look, her brow pinching upwards with mounting worry. "...no," he replied to Richard's offer rather pointedly, eyeing him incredulously. *Didn't these eggheads have **any** charisma at all?!* Richard looked taken aback by this as Hop turned to the girl, those blue irises reminding her of the sky, deep with patient understanding. He pursed his lips as El's eyes widened fearfully. She was still coming to grips with the realization that this tenuous process involved needles...and sticking them into her arm, but this epiphany struck Hop as ludicrous. *Of course she knew this was coming...right?* Hop blinked, opening his mouth to speak, to lend her anything to cling to amidst her fleeting desperation.

"Sarah...honey, it's **just** a shot..." he explained, trying to calm his hysterical daughter. It was to no avail; the child was **wailing** endlessly, shaking her head in a tantrum, furious with her parents for tricking her into coming here. "After this, we can go out and get you some ice cream!" Hop reminded her in a cheery tone.

"NO!" Sarah stomped her foot, her blonde curls bouncing about fiercely. "I wanna go **home NOW!**"

"Oh...I do too honey...Daddy has to go to work tomorrow..." Hopper consoled her, cupping her cheeks in his hands. "-but you need to get this **one** shot done before that..."

"NOO..." she droned, her cry deafening and shrill. Hop blinked, pursing his lips and squinting at the noise. "I **HATE** SHO-OTS..." she sobbed a little comically, going on to list the cons of getting one (most of them steeped in bias). "They're **stupid!**" she added at the end of her record.

"But honey...you've only had **one** so far..." Diane chuckled, gripping the girl's shoulder comfortingly.

"NO...I-I HAVEN'T..." Sarah denied this information, pouting quite adorably as Hopper and Diane exchanged sideways grins. The doctor stood behind them as they crouched around their daughter, waiting patiently with his hands clasped before him. He didn't have children – not yet, at least – but he was secretly observing the two parents, mentally outlining how to handle these kinds of situations, should **his** life ever call for it. This certain doctor was quite young, and he made a habit of covertly studying each family he worked with, softly watching them as they interacted, blissfully unaware. This – of course – meant he'd seen the best and the **worst** of family units...but he had a feeling about these two. He continued standing by, listening intently to what Hop was about to say next.

"Honey, honey...listen to me," Jim gathered her attention, his eyes young and blue. "When the doctor gives you the shot, I want you to hold Daddy's hand, okay? And I want you to squeeze it as **hard as you can**, because I know you're **really** angry at Daddy right now, right?"

Sarah sniffed, nodding into her sleeve and glaring at her father, "Uh-huh..." Hop clasped his daughter's tiny hand in his, nodding understandably. He had to hide his chuckle from her, lest she become even **more** upset.

"Okay...just squeeze my hand **as hard** as you can and look at Mommy, alright? You won't even feel it, I **swear**," Hop swore, waving a hand in a small, promising motion.

Sarah sniffed, eyeing her father sternly. There was a moment of defiant reluctance, but Sarah thought better of her father. He'd tricked her **plenty** of times...but he wouldn't outright lie to her. "...o-okay..." she wavered, grouching behind those bright blue eyes.

"Alright..." Hop echoed as the doctor smiled, prepping the needle. Hop urged, "Look at Mommy Sarah! Look at Mommy!" Diane cooed affectionately, whispering consolations to her daughter as the young man cleaned a spot on her arm with a tiny alcohol pad. Then, Hop noticed a moment of inextinguishable anguish cross his daughter's face, dreading what was bound to come. He wished he could wipe it all away...but as

soon as the needle pierced her skin and the shot was delivered, Sarah's eyes widened in astonishment.

The doctor seamlessly extracted the needle, happier than when he'd come in. "...all done!" he announced in a warm smile.

Sarah peered down at her arm, astounded. Diane cheered in a tiny voice, "Yaaay!"

"See?! That wasn't so bad, was it?" Hop asked, kissing her affectionately on the hand.

Sarah blinked, then let out the cutest of giggles, "...I couldn't even feel it!"

Hop laughed wholeheartedly as Sarah simpered, a little embarrassed with herself for throwing a fit earlier. "I **told** you so," he smiled knowingly, adding a playful pitch to his voice that made his daughter squeal with mirth. The doctor collected his things, smiling to himself, now knowing **exactly** what to do for his future children when it came time to deliver their shots.

For a moment, Hop was lost. His stomach turned at this seemingly involuntary comparison. *Stop it*, he shouted at himself. *She is **not** her. This is **different**!* An uncertain chill raced over El's skin, watching his eyes burn deeper and darker in some form of utter confusion. While his lips were parted, he took a deep sigh, lowering his gaze. Eventually – much to El's relief – he looked back up, gripping her shoulder confidently. "Take my hand," he drilled in a stern tenor. El wordlessly did as he asked, peering up at him and awaiting her next orders. "Don't look at the needle, alright?"

El's lips parted in disbelief. *No WAY was she trusting some stranger to stab her with a pin-point.* "...but-"

"Just-" he sighed declaratively, lowering his brow considerably. El caught her sentence, waiting for him to finish. "The more you look at it, the more it's going to hurt, *trust* me. Just look at me or something else...don't look at your arm...alright?" El turned to watch Richard prepping the needle, her hazel orbs widening fearfully. "Elev..." Hop blinked, sighing again in exasperation as the doctor eyed him suspiciously. "-El, *look at me.*" Hesitantly, she took her eyes from the

man, her brow pinched with worry. Their hands were clasped, and it was like every nerve-ending on the girl's body was vibrating all at once, trembling with fear, yet frozen beneath the eyes of these men. "...when it hurts, squeeze my hand. *Don't* look at the needle...don't look at the doctor...just look at me."

It wasn't *nearly* as heartfelt and comforting as when he'd asked for Sarah's trust in this matter...but Hop really was *trying*. Tiny minions shuffled through the overflowing storerooms of his brain while others dwindled about in the empty confines of his heart, coming up with nothing to say, unable to fork up some kind of sweet solace to offer the girl besides blatant coaching. He *knew* it was somewhere in there; he could taste it on his tongue, feel it hiding in his chest, and hear it play out in his imagination like a movie...but whenever he tried equivocating his thoughts, they laced over with everything anchoring him down: Joyce's stress; the Byers' safety; the *Wheelers'* safety; Eleven's well-being; Callahan's survival; Brenner's agenda; and his own depraved hospitality, sucked dry within the span of a few meager hours. Eleven's eyes gleamed with sorrow, and she blinked, inhaling deeply. "...okay," she finally agreed, tightening her grip on his encompassing hand.

Richard eyed Hop, "...ready?"

"Just do it," he sighed, keeping El's gaze locked in a different kind of staring contest...one of silent exchange and wordless consolation. Richard pursed his lips, breathing tiredly and taking a rubber band of some kind from his tub of tools. He took a moment to roll her sleeve up to her scrawny bicep, wrapping the rubber around the junction of her elbow in a tourniquet fashion. El's brow pinched worriedly as he set about tapping and flicking the underside of her arm.

Richard hummed in agreement, "You have very healthy veins!" Seemingly satisfied with one of those pale blue lifelines, he wiped an alcohol pad onto the spot, horrid memories rushing back to her. She stiffened up quite noticeably a second time, blinking back her thoughts and trying not to look at the glinting point. Her eyes closed, her tiny fingers tightening around Hop's hand, the pressure minuscule and intermittent. "You ready to save someone's life?" Richard asked, the needle hovering just above the blue. Before she could even think about her answer, a pinch *bit* her arm and she winced, tightening her

brow and pursing her lips until suddenly...*the pain was almost ignorable*. It was no surprise that blood rushed into the needle...her heart was racing with an inconsolable panic. More than shocked at how slight the pain was, she opened her eyes, her brow creasing with confusion. "...alright!" Richard said, connecting the tubes. It was such a *peculiar* feeling! Eleven wanted to shiver and rub her arms as chills raked over her, but she somehow reminded herself to remain still. She didn't want to know what would happen if she moved while the needle was still *in* her arm like that. Richard twisted some sort of connecting valve and her blood began seeping into the airtight bag. El gazed at it worriedly as Richard turned to her and smiled. Then, he pulled a rubber ball out of his pocket, placing it confidentially into her right palm.

Hop chuckled almost warmly, sounding more like a huff of air than a laugh, "Good job." She smiled a little anxiously at him, feeling the slightest sense of relief rinse through her system.

"Now...it's already coming out pretty fast, but in case it slows down and you want it to go faster, squeeze the ball in *this* hand and it'll be over before you know it!" She pursed her lips, looking down at her arm disdainfully when the sight of her vialled blood caught her eye. "I'll be back shortly," Richard announced, nodding and walking off down the hall. At his absence, Eleven released a deep sigh of long-awaited relief.

Hop eyed her, something nagging at the back of his mind, "...have you ever gotten shots before?"

She pursed her lips, her brow creasing at the frightening memories, "...yes." A nervous hand squeezed the ball once, grimacing at the sensation.

Those blue eyes bore into her brow. "...what were they for?"

She looked up at him, trying to remember what the doctors had called it, "...medicine." *So they had taken care of her*. Hop subconsciously squinted his eyes at her, his feelings conflicted yet rationalized. *She probably got better healthcare than most people do in Hawkins...*

"...what *kind* of medicine?" he questioned her promptly. She eyed him, *how could she know this information?* His curious side couldn't help asking, something wasn't sitting right with him. Of course, her entire **existence** hadn't sat right with him the moment MK Ultra was involved...but that was beside the point. *They gave her medicine and fed her, yet she's thin as a cat and just as skittish...* Hop was readying another question when they heard footsteps approaching their door. As they both awaited Richard's return, a group of doctors puzzling over some files absently passed their room. With a pent-up sigh, Hop rose to his feet and shut the door, pursing his lips and rubbing a hand through his filthy hair. He heard El sniff and turned, watching her face contort with sadness. *Shit.* "What is it?" he asked, returning to her side.

Hop could see her jaw, tight as a snare drum. She was fighting back the worst of her cries, unable to drop her guard around someone like Hopper just yet. Joyce was another matter...but El just couldn't expel these thoughts from her mind. "...h-how long?" she asked.

Hop's brow lowered at this, "...what?"

"How long?" she repeated, swallowing her anxiety.

The man shrugged, yearning to understand her sorrow so he could help her in some way. "...until the bag's full...I guess..." he squinted at the fine print against the red of her blood, soaking into a quarter of the bag. It was asking for a whole pint, and Hop's stomach churned.

"...can we...call Joyce?" Eleven asked.

Hop eyed her incredulously, "What?" She peered off to the side, looking ashamed in herself. "Eleven," he shifted closer, eyeing her sternly. "It's *okay* to cry...it's *okay* to be afraid..." Hop swallowed, watching those eyes deepen into his own. "...it doesn't make you weak...can you understand that?"

She nodded amidst her poised tears, lingering in her ducts, refusing to fall, "Yes..."

"You'll see Joyce soon," he insisted, watching as her eyes opened up with worry. "We don't need to call her." Confusion glimmered in



those hazel orbs, and her brow bent beneath the weight of this misconception, "...what's wrong?"

Unless she was forgetful, she *clearly* remembered his words...*it's a matter of life or death*. Hop blinked, utterly lost. "...how long...do I have...?"

His heart nearly collapsed onto itself at the sudden realization and for the first time that night, the floodgates opened up. "No..." he blinked, his eyes wetting with the dripping liquid. Eleven was amazed at how he could hold it together when he cried. His face didn't cringe up like hers did, and it seemed – to her – that even in his darkest moments, he managed to cling to some form of self-control and tenacity...like he still had hope that things would turn out okay. El had been proved wrong too many times to count, and her faith had been crushed into tiny, unidentifiable shards. For her, it was hard to come by...she'd only just found it in Mike and Nancy...she'd found it in Joyce several days ago; this made perfect sense to her, because these were the people she *loved*. He suddenly gripped her hand, blinking back his tears, "You're going to be *okay*. It's not gonna *kill* you."

She blinked, eyeing him hopefully, "...it won't?"

"No!" he stressed, chuckling slightly at this preposterous impression. "God no...we wouldn't allow it," Hop assured her, tightening a hand around a thin shoulder. At this, Eleven let out a small, comical sigh, a tiny smile working across her face. She thought she'd never see them again...and she'd been prepared to deal with that, unaware of the *impact* it would've had on *their* lives. The concept of sharing that human relationship with someone – one of equally returned love – still partially escaped her. She couldn't measure the depth of their devotion.

"...okay..." the stress leaked from her with each drop of blood. Her system seemed to be slowing down, and she simply assumed it was because she was finally relaxing for the first time in *hours*.

"...okay?" his eyes chuckled lightheartedly above his cautious smile. She nodded happily, pursing her lips and closing her eyes in a tranquil gesture. In that moment, they shared an unfathomable instance of connection amidst their clarity. Hop was simply

astounded, gripping her palm tighter, hoping to reassure her back to normalcy. *She'd thought **that** the whole time and yet...she'd still gone through with it.* He watched her gaze wander up to the blood bag, filled to the halfway mark. Eleven blinked tiredly, squeezing the ball in her fist and noting a sense of fatigue flush through her system. *It'll be over before you know it!* Her fingers tightened around the ball, now excited to see Joyce again.

Slowly, yet surely, she eased back into the chair, her eyes drifting shut. She felt like something could be wrong, her heart racing against her sloth-like motions. Peering down forbearingly at the needle, stuck in her skin and sucking her dry, she yearned to tear it from her arm, rush to her feet and drag Hopper out of this place and back to Joyce. Sweat collected on her skin as her thoughts ran wild, her vision suddenly rendering itself blurry with fog. Hopper was peering out into the hall, keeping a wary eye out for imaginary threats, missing the actual danger melting into the seat beside him. With the last of her energy, she exhaled, her eyes finally fluttering shut. As his mind swam with thoughts of Cal, Eleven sunk into that awful place of unconsciousness, her fingers twitching around the ball of rubber until it ultimately slipped from her fingers.

*Six hands gripped her, all of them holding her down in different places, and despite this plague wracking her body, she struggled beneath them, screeching out with unchecked anger. The chair groaned, skirting across the floor with each burst of rebuttal. "**Eleven**, stop this! You're **very** sick, and this medicine is going to make you better," Brenner tried to console her, his hands harsh and tense on her shoulders.*

*"NO!" she screamed against a cough, her ten-year-old lungs fighting an unexpected respiratory infection. "STOP IT!" El shrieked, blindly kicking one of the men in the shin. He hummed in anger, their patience worn thin. Their hands were **too** harsh, leaving bruises on her thin arms and shoulders.*

*Brenner sighed, rubbing the intersection of his eyebrows tiredly, "Get the needle."*

*She was past tears, past pleading for mercy; Eleven was **furious** with them, worked up into a flurry of well-placed kicks and aimless punches. "NO...**NO**!" She watched through watery eyes as the tall man with white*

hair slowly left the room, abandoning her in her struggle and horror. "No...PAPA!" she wrenched against their stinging grips, begging him to return, yearning for some semblance of comfort amidst her sickness. But none of them wanted what she had...they wore masks, their gloved hands leaving dark spots against her pale skin. "PAPA..." she cried, wrenching over to cough into the floor. Easily pinning her arm down, the doctor leant over the arm of the chair, quickly pricking her with the needle without the slightest of warnings. He knew it would stop her, he'd done it before. A whimper was her only response, because now she dared not move; she didn't want the needle to break off inside her arm...something told her that would hurt more. So she whimpered, grimacing as the stinging liquid mixed into her bloodstream. The men relaxed their grips, sighing into their masks as she sobbed into her shoulder, occasionally wriggling to try and get free, but to no avail. Then the needle left her, and so did the doctor, wordless and solemn.

Rounding a corner, he faced Brenner, a look of pure disgust crossing his face, "You ever think of pills? Maybe liquid medicine...you don't have to inject her with **everything** you know." Brenner eyed him dangerously as the doctor checked his words. "...she doesn't need that kind of stress..."

El's brain was pounding **far** too loudly to overhear this conversation, but the men gripping her heard it quite clearly, seeing as the speakers stood just outside the door. They eagerly awaited Brenner's response, each of them internally asking the same exact question. He spoke in that cold, calculating manner, "We need her to get better **now**, as **soon** as she can. We can't afford to waste time waiting for pills to enter her system!"

The doctor eyed him incredulously, "...it would only be half an hour...an hour **at the most!**"

Brenner nodded, dropping his gaze disdainfully, "Thank you for your help today, Matthew. You are dismissed."

Matthew eyed him sternly, almost challenging him, but not having the courage for that. Instead, he seethed, shaking his head and starting down the hall. Her shrieks suddenly crashed upon his ears, reverberating off the walls like shattering glass, "NO-O...**STOP IT!**" He flinched, turning to watch two men drag her from the examination room, her feet kicking wildly. They seamlessly hefted her fifty-six pounds back to the isolation chambers, and he could see Brenner watching them drag her away at the

end of the hall. Matthew squinted, honing in on Martin's face...was that a pang of guilt tightening in his jaw? Could it be? Brenner glanced his way and Matthew promptly flicked his gaze on another man walking towards him. He'd also been there, but since it only took two to lift her, his help was no longer required. His brown eyes were distant, hollow and self-depreciating. His hair was a tad thin and wispy, an almost perfect chestnut brown; he had a gruff look about him that reminded Matt of Texas. Brenner continued watching them drag her away as Matthew joined this man in his broken walk, away from the boss and the girl. Her screams followed them, **"PAPA!"**

"Matt..." the gruff man spoke in a hushed whisper.

**"PAPA!"** Brenner watched her watch him, helplessly distraught.

"...what?" he replied, his voice just as hollow as his neighbor's.

**"NO...NO!"**

The two men turned down a hall and out of Brenner's eye-line, stopping to face each other. "I don't think I can do this anymore..." the gruff-looking one shook his head, his eyes glistening. His voice pitched upwards in a subdued sob. The slam of her door shook the building, and the echoing silence told them she was locked away...seamlessly forgotten...for now.

Matthew pursed his lips, peeking around the corner. Brenner was gone as quickly as he'd come, much to Matt's relief. "Ross...please, hear me. I will likely never say this again..." Ross locked onto Matthew's brown eyes. "...I don't like it either...I **hate** doing this. You're not the only one..." Ross managed a small smile at this revelation, waiting for Matt to continue. "...but we both signed a contract and-"

"Oh Christ...to **HELL** with the damn contract!" Ross accidentally rose his voice, his eyes widening with fear.

"Quiet!" Matt ordered, his eyes glaring. They both checked the corners, meeting again to continue this verboten exchange. "...did you read it in its entirety? **EVERY WORD?**"

"Pfft...**NO!** Did anyone?!" he hissed. Matthew sighed, rubbing his balding head with a clammy hand. "...did **you?**!"

"Yes!"

"**And?!**"

"...we aren't allowed to say **anything**...to **anyone**," Matt continued, his perspiration reflecting each speck of artificial light. "...do you understand?"

Ross fought back tears, "...y-yeah, I get it."

"...it says that we can be...**d-dispatched**, if we talk about it...**alright?**" Matt pressed. Ross nodded, wordlessly drinking in this poisonous information. "I'm telling you this because you're my friend..."

"Yeah...**okay**," Ross stammered, collecting himself.

Matthew's gaze intensified, "One day...things will change..."

"**Oh** don't give me that crap!" Ross wanted to shove him. "The only way this'll stop is when he pushes her too far and she ends up **killin'** herself!"

"Stop!" Matt seethed, wiping his mouth with a hand. "Don't...d-don't **say** that..."

The firebrand continued, "**WHY?** You **know** it's true! There ain't a person in the world out there looking for her...ain't **nobody** gonna know she's gone!" Matt marveled at how well Ross composed himself when he **wasn't** like this; he supposed if he was wound too tight, his inner accent just decided to present itself.

"Ross **please**..." Matt urged him into silence, peering over his shoulder out of unnerving cowardice. "We can talk more later...but **not NOW**. I'm sorry..." Ross' skin was blotched with fury, seething between gritted teeth. He shook his head, wordlessly continuing on down the hall, leaving Matthew behind to deal with his trauma in private. Suddenly, the lights flickered, and Matthew peered up at them wondrously, his eyes wide with fear.

The sound of the ball bouncing against the floor had Hopper turning to gaze at her, a cold sweat instantly washing over him. Her pallor was frighteningly white, and he could see tiny blue veins marring her temples. Those eyelids looked hollow and suddenly drained within

the span of a few minutes. "Hey..." he shook her shoulder and his heart began to flutter. No answer, not even a flinch or a pointed glare...*nothing*. His skin prickled over like it'd been smashed with a gust of wind, chilling him to the bone. He felt the slack of her hand, humid yet cold and he pressed the back of his to her forehead. It was *frigid*, moist with the exertion it'd taken to hang on as long as she had. His blue eyes deepened apprehensively, lighting on the needle, *knowing* he could remove it right now and put an end to this. He glared over his shoulder at the bag, *almost* filled to the brim with Cal's only hope. Hop gritted his teeth and reached down to grasp the ball. "Come on...wake up," he pled in a subdued whisper. Her breath was the only warm thing about her, shallow and delicate. *Why was this happening?*!Thousands of guesses plagued his mind, varying from her age to her weight and to what she'd eaten, not knowing that *each* of these factors played a key role in her overwhelming exhaustion. He peered over his shoulder at the closed door, his eyes wide and piercing, like those of a killer about to be caught red-handed.

Pursing his lips, he determinedly pressed the ball into her hand and squeezed her fingers around it. More blood worked its way into the bag, deserting her body with each coiling of muscle. Intermittently, he glanced back to the bag, waiting for it to fill to the top, feeling that pang of guilt slash his chest with each gentle squeeze. After a minute of this, he sighed and threw the ball across the room. As her hand dropped to her lap, the stress ball ricocheted about like the doubts and fears bouncing about in Hop's brain. Everything they'd come here to do suddenly didn't matter anymore, and he began running on autopilot, gripping the needle and gently sliding it from her arm. A line of blood leaked free along her skin as he hastily unwrapped that goddamned tourniquet, his glare tearing about the room. The ball finally rolled to a stop in the far corner as he rushed to his feet, scrambling to open a jar of gauze and bury his hand inside, grabbing just a single wad. Several pieces littered the counter as he abandoned the open glass, *wrenching* a strip of tape from the dispenser. Wiping the blood and taping the gauze down over that weeping vein, Hop eyed the blood bag. Somehow he followed the instructions enough to learn how to seal it, hastily removing the tubing and leaving that on the floor. Knocking a few other jars onto their sides, Hopper snagged a scrap of paper from the corner, scratching the words, *For Callahan*, onto its side in shaky penmanship.

*HURRY*, he told himself. *You need to leave before he comes back. There can be no more questions.* Hop was drowning in a pool of his own lies, wishing only to ensure that she survived this. Tearing the blood bag from its post, Hopper slapped it onto the counter, taping the tiny note onto its cover. "Okay..." he allowed a shaky exhale, gazing back to her figure, slumped lazily in the chair, deaf to the world. For a moment, his eyes bore into hers and he wanted to cry out; he wanted nothing more than to collapse onto the floor and weep, surrendering himself to these choking emotions. Then he'd remember Joyce, and it'd keep him going...and just the sight of her, unawake and motionless in that retched chair haunted him. His heart pitched about like a song, pounding against his sternum like a hand on a door. Unable to wring himself dry and concoct another clever lie to cover the fact that she was *anything* but well, he crossed the room in two swift strides. Hooking his hands beneath her shoulders, he stood her out of the chair, lifting her into his arms just like before. Using his shoulder, he cradled her head into his chest so as not to worry the staff as he rushed from the room. As he carried her, something pressed into his arm, feeling very odd and out-of-place on Eleven's back. An anxious Hopper paid it no mind, braving the eyes of every nurse, doctor and practitioner *besides* Richard, who was still apparently busy with something.

Many onlookers eyed them, smiling warmly as they went along their way, living on in blissful ignorance of what was *actually* happening... and then there were those whose eyes shadowed him down the hall, sending icy terror jolting into his veins like antifreeze. Hop avoided their stares, instinctively quickening his pace as he wound his way towards the exit.

A nurse politely held the doors open for him as he stepped through, nodding in silent thanks. Rosa recognized him, noticing a look of worry splashed over him yellow paint, "...something the matter?"

"Nope, everything's fine. Make sure he gets that blood," Hop tossed over his shoulder, pushing himself through the doors and towards his car. The moon hung in the sky, and what felt like several hours had only amounted to one. Hop opened the passenger side door, cursing at the obstacle of a seat. Somehow, he fumbled with the lever whilst still carrying her, and the seat collapsed...*then* he miraculously

managed to get her back there without too much struggle. A car passed them on the road and he jerked his head back to watch it, those blue eyes salient in the darkness. He climbed into his seat, unfolding the one beside him and reaching back to tend to her. El's condition hadn't improved or declined...it had plateaued, tentatively bordering on life-threatening. Of course, there was no way for him to accurately tell: they'd just left the care of countless nurses and experts.

"Hey...*hey*..." he tapped her cheek, creasing his brow in frustration. "Oh come on kid...*wake up*..." Hopper implored, gritting his teeth and gazing out through the windows. *It's not safe here...get her somewhere safe, then help her.* Hop reached between the seats, grasping a belt and buckling her in. Pulling it over her midsection, he inadvertently dragged the bottom of her shirt up a bit, and he noticed something smearing the white of her skin. Freezing mid-motion, Hop stared, pressing a curious hand into the color and bringing it to his face in the dark. He squinted at his fingers, blindly reaching back to flick a light on. As it filled the silent space, he recognized that pigment of blood staining his hands. A tremor shook him and he gently returned his hand to her side, turning his palm upwards only to come back with even more blood. His hand trembled at the feel of it and his jaw clenched. *Where was this coming from? Had she been **hiding** this from him? Or did she not know?!* Hop tried steadying his breaths, hastily buckling her in and righting himself in his seat. "...hang on kid..." he mumbled, his hand slipping against the steering wheel, speeding recklessly towards the edge of town.

"How's everything go-?" Richard froze in the doorway, gazing about the empty room. He allowed himself a moment to aimlessly look about, noticing the mess. It deeply disturbed him, an odd chill quaking through his core. Reflexively, he readjusted the upset chair, walking to the counter and returning the wads of gauze to their jar. When he saw the bag, engorged with Eleanor's blood, his fingers froze around the handle of the lid. *For Callahan*, was scribbled onto a paper and slapped onto the top. He brought the note to his face, entering into his own form of panic and doubt. As if the answers to all his questions were still sitting right behind him, Richard expectantly gazed back to the empty chairs. His eyes tore back to the blood bag, still gripping its mass between his ungloved fingers.



Shaking his head, Richard raced from the room, going against his fears and following his gut. Luckily enough for Callahan, he was one of those doctors who actually *enjoyed* their line of work.

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: Someone needs to make a music video for Stranger Things and use that song. I will *pay* to see that happen xD

Also, I was surprised at the amount of chemistry there is between these two characters: Hopper and Eleven. It was *really* fun to write with that. Thank you Duffers.

This chapter...*\*sigh\**...this chapter is...the longest one so far. I spent so much time on it, *endlessly* looking it over and rearranging certain things...I hope you guys like how it turned out. Thank you SO MUCH for following this story! There WILL be continued updates, rest assured. I just want you guys to read easy, compared to suffering through a long story with shitty plot lines...the whole quality over quantity sort of thing. The reason it takes me so long to upload is because I want the stuff I put out there to be as good as I can get it, for you guys!

Follow for more chapters and tell me what you think! Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*

## 28. White Rabbit

### Chapter Twenty-Eight – White Rabbit

His hands gripped the wheel as his eyes lingered far into the distance. He could see down the road, as far as his high beams reached with their gleaming light...but he blinked anyway, somehow unable to focus on anything. The green Pinto stood, parked on a deserted section of Cornwallis. In the obscurity of night, it was easy to imagine that this machine was the only breathing thing out here...but he knew this wasn't so. Hundreds of nocturnal creatures lurked in the shadows, probably eyeing them right now, reluctant and curious, blinking back at the obnoxious headlights. His jaw ached from the countless times he found himself grinding his teeth, but he did it again, peering back to gaze at the strange little girl. Her wounds had broken, and blood was lazily seeping into Mike's favorite sweater. This was still an indeterminable fact to him, concealed by the very people who'd intended on keeping her safe. *No...it's not fair to think like that.* In their minds, she was with Joyce right now, sleeping in a home of safety instead of lying unconscious in the back of her car. *You lied to their faces.* He turned back to face the road, his temples pulsing as his brain worked on something new and difficult.

Tiredly, he gazed down at his flannel shirt, losing himself in that red, plaid pattern; an eternal web of right-angles and squares. His worn jeans clung well to him, even after all of today's horrifying excursions. The watch on his wrist was smeared a slight red, along with Joyce's steering wheel. *How could he face her now?*

Hop shook his head, some part of his psyche splitting open, that all-too-familiar darkness spuming through the splintery crack.

*"When you bring her, you may not wear your uniform. Wear street clothing..."*

In a dreamlike state, Hop shifted about, turning back to look at the girl, nearly motionless. Her sides were the only indication that she was even alive, gently rising and falling with every shallow breath. A light sheen coated her forehead...sweat from her last waking moments. Her eyes were dark and hollow; she made *him* look entirely

healthy, and Hop *knew* he looked like shit.

*"...and if you know what's good for you, she **must** be asleep or unconscious...at the very least, blindfolded."*

Hop inhaled deeply, his lungs expanding far wider than Eleven's ever could. He was doing it again...clenching his jaw tight, biting down on some indigestible idea; whether this was good for his teeth didn't concern him in the least.

*"After that...you will never have to worry about her again."*

He could do it, right now...maybe skip town. Go back to Indianapolis, rent some run-down apartment and live there. Abandon this sad little life he'd carved out for himself in Hawkins. *He'd have to turn in his badge...and say goodbye to Joyce.*

*And Eleven.*

Hop felt like shivering, even though he wasn't cold. His eyes rested on her form, his mind ripping in two over an uncompromising debate. That cold, cryptic heart of his could only undulate beneath the pressure of this searing indecision. He was suddenly starved of oxygen. *Take a breath*, he told himself. His lungs filled with the fresh air he felt he didn't deserve as he contemplated each and every decision leading up to this moment.

What had he fought for over the last week? Over the last few *months?! Was it all for nothing; all of their work abolished in a single, decisive masterstroke? She'd disappeared, and suddenly – now that Brenner knew she was actually alive – they wanted her back! That wicked man seemed so intent on recovering her – as if he actually cared for the girl like Joyce and he did – yet he wasn't putting **any** action towards getting her besides threatening Hop into submission. The answer was obvious: Joyce was a better fit for her...*

*...right?*

How long had it been since she'd stepped into a school? Or celebrated a birthday? Or had someone there to hold onto during a shot? Hop was sure he was the first one to talk her through that, and now it was

costing her. *He should've just brought her home...* a bitter resentment for himself hung low in his stomach like glue. Hop dug back in his brain, reeling at a sudden twinge of empathy angrily smothering his heart. He immediately shook that from his mind...he couldn't have emotions deliberating his decision. Right now, Hop was trying to answer an impossible question...*how far back does her line of suffering stretch? Nine years? Ten? Eleven?*

*"It's okay. Hey, it's **okay**. We're right here...w-we're **right** here, honey. It's okay. I got you. Don't be afraid. I'm right here with you. I am **right** here with you...you're **safe**."* With a gasp, Eleven **surged** upwards out of the water, tearing the goggles off with a splash and instantly drawing back into Joyce's arms, breaking out into shaky sobs. Joyce only accepted this strange girl – whom she'd just met – into a soothing embrace, whispering words of comfort into her ear and holding her close. *"It's okay, it's **okay**... I got you. You did **so** good...are you okay?"*

Something else tapped him reminiscently on the shoulder...that night he stood on the Byers' front lawn, speaking to Joyce amidst that break in the relentless storm. That kiss they'd shared...but mostly what she'd said to him came back in echoes and peals.

*"Well...I was gonna say that she...probably needs a, **father** figure too..."*

Just before this, her son and he had watched her coach Eleven through another horrible pain, and something rang familiar between the two situations. Hop figured it had just been the rush of the moment...perhaps he wasn't remembering it correctly. *Or maybe he was...*he couldn't tell. Right now, his mind was a jumbled mess of clogged emotions and overflowing apprehension. He slowly began to stumble upon the realization that he *needed* Joyce...**especially** now. Could it be that she needed him too? So far, he'd only caused trouble for the Byers', putting them into mortal danger; putting *Eleven* in harm's way!

Hop blinked, a deep sigh from the girl piquing his fear. He jerked to watch her, stretching a hand back to touch hers and pursing his lips at that foreboding cold. *Joyce was going to **end** him if she saw El like this...*Hop suddenly didn't know if she could even *handle* this stomach-turning situation he'd willingly walked into. Strong, determined Joyce Byers...*she'd been through enough*. How dare he

push this upon her? All of this had started because of *him!*

...and yet...the girl – in a selfish way – owed him her *life*. He was the one who fed her...the *only* one who successfully let her know that she hadn't been forgotten, and that her efforts had *not* been in vain...

...is that why she agreed?

Hop turned back to the wheel, gripping it determinedly as the car sat, immobile and statuesque. *Take her back...* if he looked close enough, he could see the very tops of those enormous satellites peeking through the vibrant trees...calling to him, *beckoning* him over with every flash of those tiny lights. He closed his eyes and *kept* them closed for the first time that night, grasping within himself for that damned voice bating him on. Hop wanted to *strangle* it into submission, but it cowered behind his treasured – but mostly reserved – voice of reason.

Two roads lay before him: one was straight and flat, unwinding and clear of potholes. It promised an end to all of his worries, a place where his loved ones could live on in *safety*...but at the beginning of this wonderful road lay a toll, asking for someone's *life* as the only proper payment.

The second road was a steep, uphill slant, curling its way round a mountain that stretched endlessly into the heavens. There were no signs, no safety rails...there was hardly even a defined path! Scorpions hid behind every rock, poised to strike at any moment and end their journey altogether; at the current moment, Hop couldn't even see what waited for them at the top. *He could only assume it was a drop straight to the bottom.*

He was torn...his mind clashing horribly with his heart, two armies of reason throwing bomb after mind-shattering bomb over the divide, into unfair territory. The man then reached down and put the car into gear, and both sides of this endless war called an immediate cease fire. Each tiny soldier gazed about warily...having lost track of what they'd been fighting for long ago.

A wheezing sound from the backseat shook him, and he spun about, watching Eleven elicit a *sharp* intake of air. Hop spun back around,

sweat beading his brow. Gritting his teeth, he slammed his hand onto the edge of Joyce's steering wheel. His fingers curled around dried blood that wasn't his, cracking against the creasing skin. He needed to make a decision...because now *she* was the one running out of time, her heart ticking down with every contraction. *There are doctors there...in that place.* The tide had turned, with Hop standing at the helm of their tiny ship, braving an upcoming maelstrom, sporting that priceless poker face he wore so well. Whatever he ended up choosing, it would be a different kind of agonizing for all parties involved. So, he let his foot off the brake, his wheels rolling off into the night. Those blue irises glimmered, furious against the dusk. As he drove, a curious owl lighted itself on a precarious-looking branch, watching his taillights shrink into the distance. A gust of wind picked up, threatening to sweep him over and out of the tree...but he didn't worry in the slightest, easily opening his wings and gliding into the air. Not once had he *ever* placed his faith in tree branches...

Nancy lay in bed, clutching her comforter close to her and pursing her lips. She couldn't sleep, all of tonight's revelations clanging noisily about in her brain. Her heart was still pulsing at an alarmingly quick rate, her gaze stuck to the window. That brow furrowed at the night sky, feeling her very limbs vibrating above the force of her all-consuming anxiety. *Get up.* Her body demanded it, and so she did, flipping the covers off and rising to her feet.

*Why had Hopper looked the way he had?* Eleven would've been perfectly fine sleeping in her room, there was no point in banishing her to the basement anymore. She was known...but just how many people knew about her existence? There was no telling. The young woman couldn't help but feel as if she didn't know something. She'd hoped that she'd be able to feel the wool, were it ever pulled over her eyes...but she couldn't! Nancy stood before her bulletin board, gazing softly at all of the pictures of her and Barb. That familiar twinge of sadness creeped up from the depths of her stomach and Nancy almost lost her thoughts for a moment, shaking her head and gazing outside.

*Joyce knows she's safe here...right?* Perhaps Nancy was overanalyzing this, like she did with most of her school assignments. But this wasn't *Shakespeare*...this wasn't iambic pentameter she had to memorize. Eleven was back. Brenner was alive. Hopper was acting very

strange...or at least laboring through the vicious throes of insomnia. These were cold, hard **facts**...and Nancy felt prepared to sort them out. Stepping back to her hanging board, she pursed her lips. Her fingers lighted down on a picture of Barb and Nancy shook her head. "I'm sorry..." she whispered, voice pitching about breathily as she removed a thumbtack. Holding that memory in her palm, she did the same with the rest, and her tears slid down her cheeks, falling through the open space and occasionally splashing onto one of the photos. With each tear, another photo was removed from the board and slipped into her dainty hand, clearing a space on the right side.

Barb's funeral came back to her...in gruesome detail. Her mother, brought to her *knees* beneath her crushing despair...Barb's father kneeling beside the woman, consoling her and simply trying his best to hold everything together. Barb had been their *only* child...and Nancy could feel that stake of guilt pierce her heart just as poignantly as she had those months ago. Nancy had been especially bitter that day; her tears had stung something horrible. Steve was there beside her...he'd even bought a bouquet of flowers for the Holland's, offering his condolences on the side. Hopper had been there as well...standing in the back, behind the Wheelers, smoking a cigarette like a looming reminder of Nancy's culpability.

*If only I had gone with her...she was only looking out for me and I told her to go home.*

Nancy's lips trembled, gazing down at the memoirs empathetically. Gingerly, she opened one of her topmost drawers and placed the layers inside. Not all of them had been of Barb...some were family photos, with Baby-Mike and her parents, captured in a younger, happier day. She'd kept *those* on the board...she'd spread them out some other day. Right now, she needed to stare into that empty space. She knew this was a huge part of any grieving process. *Letting go. Moving on.* Even after all these months, she was dumbfounded at how hard it was to do this seemingly simple action.

But that's how life was; Nancy just hadn't lived through this part just yet. So, with a gentle, quivering hand, she pushed against the drawer until it closed, two separate streams of tears joining hands at the apex of her chin and dropping to the carpet. *Was this how Mike felt when Will was...?* No, it couldn't have been this bad for them. Mike seemed

to know long before the rest of them did that Will wasn't really dead (she figured this was mostly thanks to Eleven). But then she remembered when Barb's parents had visited their house that night, and Mike had stormed in, utterly distraught and beyond words. Their mother had held him and Nancy had stood from her seat, watching them and fearing the worst.

In that second...Mike had felt the worst of what she was feeling right now. Perhaps it had even burned deeper for him, having gotten his hopes up. Either way, Nancy wanted to bury this sorrow...to burn it like they had the Demogorgon. Slowly, she slipped back to her bed, exhausted and purposefully stifling her thoughts, saving them for tomorrow. Her head was pounding much too harshly to deal with them today. Reluctantly, she closed her eyes, trying to find some sleep.

*Dry leaves crunched beneath their shoes as they slipped beside an overturned tree, crouching behind it. The older man peeked over the edge like a spy, then let out a little gasp. His gaze opened up with terror as his son looked on, "W-What is it?"*

*"Shh!" he hissed, a finger pressed to his lips below a glare. Haplessly curious, Jonathan peeked over the log, spying a bundle of trembling fur. "...see that?" Lonnie's whisper met his ears.*

*"Uh-huh..." Jonathan nodded, his eyes young and squinting at the struggling creature. It was bicycle-kicking something attached to its ankle rather furiously, throwing itself onto its side in a panicked frenzy. "...is that a rabbit?" he asked, his eyes opening up with wonder.*

*"Yep..." Lonnie nodded, wetting the corner of his lips with his tongue and readying a pistol. Jonathan turned, still smiling...until he saw the gun. "...boy do rabbit's taste good. You'll see...we'll bring this sucker back home to Will and Mom and cook it right up." As Jonathan's expression drastically changed, an oblivious Lonnie added, "...I'll even show you how to gut it."*

*"...you're gonna...kill it?" Jonathan swallowed a nervous lump in his throat.*

*His father rolled his eyes. "Well it's not gonna kill itself, now is it?" For a moment, he recognized that look of distress paint over his son's face and*



he sighed. "...you know what? **You** kill it."

The boy stared at him, taken aback with horror. "...**me**?!"

"Yeah! You're **ten** now Jonny-boy..." he sighed, loading the weapon absentmindedly. "...it's about time you started acting like it." Jonathan was sure he was joking...or maybe this was all some sick prank. Wouldn't be the first time his dad had scared him out of his wits, yelling about how Huxley had been hit by a car when he was really just locked in the shack. But he saw the way Lonnie snapped the revolver into place, holding it out to him expectantly. Jonathan's stomach turned with worry. "...you ready?"

"...no..." he admitted, shame coating his words.

Lonnie lowered the gun, along with his posture as he sighed, eyeing the boy incredulously. "Look Jonathan...you do this, and Will gets to try his first rabbit. Think of it **that** way." Jonathan's brow wrinkled fretfully, peering down at his shoes. "...you're gonna have to do this someday."

That's when the boy eyed him ludicrously, "...no I **won't**!"

"You know what I mean..." Lonnie rolled his eyes at the boy who **clearly** did not know what he meant. "Look, I'm not asking anymore," he pressed the weapon into Jonathan's small hands. "I'm **telling** you." Lonnie's eyes grew stern and Jonathan's throat went dry. "...kill it." Before Jonathan could answer, Lonnie had gripped his sleeve and stood, forcing him to his feet from the behind the log. Now that the rabbit could see them, it doubled its futile efforts, flipping about chaotically and shrieking to itself in fear. It **knew** what was coming, and just that made Jonathan hate this so much more.

"...can't we kill another rabbit? Does it have to be **this** one?" Jonathan plead, eyeing his father imploringly.

"**No!** I worked **too** damn hard to tie these snares. We're **not** letting this one get away," Lonnie declared, his brow creasing imposingly. "Now aim the damn gun and shoot!"

"But Dad I don't know how!" Jonathan shouted back above the rabbit's tiny screeches.

Lonnie rolled his eyes and fumbled the gun from his son's hands. He sighed heavily, "Course you don't...silly me." A second later, Lonnie pointed the gun at the ground **directly** beside the tiny creature and pulled the trigger. A deafening echo burst through the forest. Hordes of birds were thrown into the sky in heaps and armfuls, and the rabbit was struck deaf, now petrified into a motionless state. Jonathan's hands slowly left his ears, eyeing the terrified creature. "See? You pull the damn trigger and shoot," Lonnie hastily coached, pushing it back into Jonathan's hands. "Now you try."

"But Dad...can't we shoot something else?"

He rolled his eyes dismissively, yet he still entertained him. "Like what?"

Jonathan sniffed, "...I don't know...**anything** but a rabbit..."

Lonnie blinked, eyeing him sternly. "...what? Are you gonna cry now?" Jonathan's blood boiled to his face, the gun heavy in his fingers. Lonnie scoffed, spreading his arms in a welcoming gesture, "You better get used to this Jon...this is a part of **growing up**. Now quit **crying**...or I'll **give** you something to **cry** about!" The father stared dangerously at his son who stared right back, his tears staining his young determined face. Despite Jonathan's valiant attempt at gallantry...his lip trembled and that defiant glower cracked, splitting open almost immediately. Wordlessly, the boy turned in a shuffle, facing the rabbit disdainfully and raising the gun. Lonnie broke into a contemptuous smile, "...that's what I thought." Squinting his eyes, Jonathan's fingers trembled, his heart raced against his sadness. The rabbit was still in a state of shock, shivering slightly, its sides heaving unimaginably fast. "...take the shot," Lonnie's voice softened, crouching down and feigning interest in Jonathan's posture.

For a second, Jonathan inhaled, almost believing that he could do it. He tried reminding himself that there were plenty of other rabbits out there... but then he stopped to think about all of Thumper's sisters. What if this rabbit had brothers or sisters they didn't know about? Or babies?! How would they survive without its help?! Jonathan hesitated, his finger testing the sensitivity of the trigger a tad too boldly. In one heart-stopping moment, Jonathan pressed too hard and the gun went off. That single explosion sent a tiny shockwave through the boy's body, and his hands alone felt like they'd been shaken by some demonic beast. The recoil nearly slammed into his forehead, missing it by a few inches. The bullet

*plunged itself into the soil far behind the rabbit. Too frightened to move, the rabbit simply held its breath, its dark eyes wide and fearful. "Oh **come on** Jonathan! It wasn't even **moving**!" he exclaimed.*

*"Dad I can't do it!" the boy informed him, rubbing his still vibrating hands and trying not to cry.*

*"Jesus Christ..." Lonnie rolled his eyes, gripping Jonathan by the sleeve and walking him around the log. The boy trailed along, half-dragging, half-stumbling along their way. They now stood directly above the small creature, tall and monstrous to those beady eyes. "Now there's no way you can miss. Try again," Lonnie instructed, pointing at the animal. Jonathan winced, shaking his head at Lonnie's request. "...**SHOOT THE DAMN RABBIT JONATHAN!**"*

*"I can't!"*

*"I'm **telling** you to **do it**!" Lonnie ordered in a booming tone. He straightened his arms out for him, guiding his finger towards the trigger. "Now **do it**!"*

*"B-But-?"*

*"**SHOOT THE GUN!**" Lonnie ordered.*

*"No!" Jonathan cried, closing his eyes against the heartbreaking sight.*

*"**NOW!**"*

*That spine-rattling gunshot forced him from his nightmare and with a gasp sent him from his mattress. He sat up against his sheets, sweat slacking his skin. Jonathan could feel tears welling up in his eyes. *He'd been crying in his sleep...when was the last time he'd done that?* November of last year. He couldn't even recall the last time Lonnie had entered his dreams...that was one of the few times. With shaky breaths, Jonathan laid back into the mattress, his heart racing. His father was dead now...he wouldn't have to worry about him terrorizing Will or Joyce or him anymore. But, there was an emptiness with this realization, a hollow reminder of what could lay ahead for all of them. His skin pricked with concern and he blinked, unsure of whether sleep would find him tonight.*

Hesitantly, as if he were still treading on thin ice or hallowed ground, his thoughts turned to Nancy. *We're supposed to go to a concert tomorrow...* how was he supposed to abandon his mother now, after what had **just** happened? Hopefully by then Will and Eleven would be home and...Jonathan's mind skit to a halt.

*Will. He was going to find out.*

This idea had never struck Jonathan...he'd never had to wonder about how Will would react if their father mysteriously *died* because Lonnie was usually never around. He spent his last years drinking and partying to his heart's content, trying to find something close to what he'd had with Joyce in Cynthia...if they were even still together. Jonathan didn't know...a part of him wished he did.

...and then another part of him felt a strange sense of relief wash over him, reminding himself that Lonnie had been a bad influence in his life that Jonathan had expertly overlooked. He hoped he hadn't become too much like him. The young man suddenly wanted to check on his mother and see if Eleven was here already. He rose to his feet and crossed the room, walking into the entrance-way and peering in. Joyce was curled up on the couch, a bottle of rum sitting half empty on the table. Pursing his lips, he walked over to close it and Joyce woke so suddenly that it startled him.

"WILL?!" she reached blindly for Jonathan's arm, almost making him knock the bottle over.

"**Mom!** Mom it's me..." he said, gripping her shoulders confidently.

"...Jonathan?" she blinked, and he could smell a slight hint of whiskey on her words. "...w-where's Will?"

"He's at a sleepover...at the Wheelers..." he reminded her, furrowing his brow anxiously. Hastily, he capped the bottle and held her by the hand. "...you should go to bed Mom."

"...no...no I...I-I can't yet..." she sighed, shaking her head and eyeing the sloshing liquid from outside the bottle. "...s-she's not home yet..."

"Hopper will let us know when he gets here...okay?" Jonathan swore.

"You need to get some rest, in a *real* bed...okay?"

"No...no I need to *wait* for her Jonathan..." she pressed the edge of her wrist into her mouth worriedly.

"But Mom..." Jonathan groaned.

"I'm *fine* Jonathan! You don't understand...she *needs* me to be here for her...." Jonathan's ears perked. It was like she was echoing Lonnie's words to her right back to Jonathan. His gaze went stern on instinct, and even Joyce caught herself, knowing what she'd done. Lonnie had a way of leaving tiny parts of himself behind like that...even in Jonathan whenever he was angry, even in Will whenever he was afraid. Even in death, he still had quite the presence in this household.

Jonathan shook his head, "Mom...I'm sorry..."

"For what?" she demanded, rising to her feet.

"...arguing with you...before...I didn't mean to just leave like that," tears welled in those dark, piercing eyes. "I was just so...*angry*."

"Oh Jonathan..." she shook her head, pulling him into the embrace he'd needed since Hopper had dropped that stick of dynamite in their living room. "It's okay...it's okay..." she consoled. "We're...w-we're gonna figure this out..."

"No..." he refused, pulling away from her.

"Huh? What-?"

"**No** I don't wanna **figure** it **out!**" Jonathan snapped, wringing from her arms. "I want this to be *over!*"

Joyce eyed him questioningly, "...what?"

"Dad wasn't even a *part* of this whole...conspiracy thing, and they **killed him**," he declared pointedly. Joyce's gaze went soft, her brow pinched longingly. "...I don't want them to do that to you..." the teenager shook his head, his heart raging like an inferno inside his chest.

"Jonathan..." she latched onto his arms, unable to accept what he was suggesting. "She...*needs*us..."

"Yeah but do we really need *her*?!" he sputtered, his rage flaring up in unchecked lava plumes. Joyce eyed him accusingly, letting go of his arms mechanically. "She's just putting us in *danger*...putting *you* and *Hop* in danger and-"

Joyce's hand collided so smartly with his cheek that Jonathan stopped midsentence. He stared back at her, wide-eyed and dumbfounded, those lava plumes immediately smothering themselves. "...*how DARE you say she's useless!*" Joyce bellowed, her voice raising above his. "She *saved* your *brother* Jonathan...she *saved* Will, without even *knowing* us!" Jonathan swallowed, pursing his lips and eyeing the floor comprehendingly. "We OWE her Jonathan! She's a *part* of this family now...and she's *NOT* going back there, *ever*again!" There was something so outrageously real about Joyce's fury. She only saved it for dire situations, and considering Jonathan's folly...*yeah, he totally deserved this*. How could he have forgotten what Eleven had sacrificed for them? "I...I-I can't *believe* you would even suggest that!" Joyce gestured her disbelief with a frantic hand.

"I'm sorry..." he shook his head, his face cringing up in despair. "Mom, it's just..."

"I *know* it's scary right now..." she fought to lower her voice back to one of gentle reassurance. "But..." Joyce sucked in a deep sigh, shaking her head. "...I, am *never* going to leave you Jonathan...for as long as I live...I'm *not* gonna leave you." Jonathan sniffed, his emotions choking him into silence. "...a-and those men...this, *conspiracy*...we can get over this. I *know* it!" He closed his eyes, drinking in the bittersweet taste of his own tears. She'd sobered up within seconds of him mentioning that ridiculous proposal, and now her head stung with a completely new kind of pain. "...okay?"

Jonathan shook his head, "...okay..."

Joyce melted into a sigh. "...now *come* here!" she ordered, beckoning him with a wave of outstretched hands. Jonathan met her in another hug, his arms encompassing her easily. "We just...we *need* to trust Hopper...okay?" She could feel him nodding in the space above her

shoulder, sniffing to himself. "Right now...he's our only hope..."

After this argument, Jonathan begrudgingly returned to his room. His eyes closed against salty sadness, and he placed his headphones on, hoping it would lull him to sleep. It worked, and he was vaulted into another dream...short but acutely intense. He didn't know where he was or what he was doing...he wasn't even sure what he was wearing. It felt like a suit. He looked down. *It was a suit.* Jonathan looked back up, flinching back upon seeing his father standing before him, a glower across his face. Suddenly, there were dead rabbits *everywhere*, falling from the trees, already laying on the ground, all of them with gunshot wounds. Lonnie never looked away from his panicked son, who was gazing about maniacally. Something told him to run...he couldn't remember what it was. That's when Lonnie spoke, his voice a low and meaningless grumble.

"...you ain't no son of mine..." With that, the man disappeared, and in the exact same instance, the Demogorgon burst out of the ground, inadvertently drawn in by the rabbit's blood.

Nancy was suddenly behind him, shouting into his ear, "SHOOT IT JONATHAN!" A gun was in his hand, so Jonathan tried lifting it to aim, but it was like his arm suddenly weighed a ton. He couldn't even move a finger, stuck in place like a piece of stone. "JONATHAN!?" Nancy demanded, clutching that baseball bat in her delicate hands.

"I-I CAN'T!" he shouted back, struggling to lift his arm. Miraculously, Nancy seemed to *understand* his dilemma, rushing to his side and trying to lift his arm with him. Her hands struggled against his sleeve as she pushed with all her might. Meanwhile, the Demogorgon had just finished crawling through that tear, now towering before them. "NANCY RUN!"

"What?!" she demanded, eyeing him incredulously.

"Get out of here! Just GO! I'll be FINE..." Jonathan ordered, turning to eye her only to find that she was already gone. That bone-chilling roar was the last thing he heard before he forced himself out of the dream, panting and clutching an imaginary gun in his hand. His eyes were wide, immediately drifting to the window. An obnoxiously loud song was blaring into his eardrums, so he tore the headphones off.

The sun was just rising. *She had to be back now*, he thought, rushing to his feet and bursting through his door.

Slowly, the world flickered into view. A voice echoed in and out of comprehension, varying from incoherent gibberish to whole, intelligible sentences. A man was standing in the corner of the room, speaking to someone on a telephone when he turned, approaching that groggy face and leaning closer. "H---ey---wake?" His lips moved, but his voice dropped out a few times, like a poor radio connection. Then, he felt hands gripping his shoulders, anchoring him back down to reality. "...whoa..." Powell's familiar face finally drifted into view, distinguishing itself against the fog. Cal watched him, very confused as the dark man grinned, smiling to himself. "You are **one lucky** son-of-a-bitch..."

"Mm...*huh?*" Cal mumbled, his head throbbing incessantly. "...w-what time is it?" He somehow found the clarity to speak properly.

"It's morning...look-" Powell walked to the edge of the room, pulling the curtains open mercilessly. Sunshine *inundated* the tiny room with glaring light. "-RISE AND SHINE!" he droned.

"Oh...NO!" Cal groaned as Powell grinned victoriously. "No no no no no...close that...*ugh...*" the man waved his hands about in a sloth-like fashion, his words just as sluggish. He slammed his eyes shut against the radiance, humming in anger. A sharp pain raked inside his chest and he winced, dropping his arms to his sides. *This is worse than that hangover from New Years*, he thought to himself.

"Yeah alright..." Powell snickered, pulling the cloth together and returning to Cal's side. "It's about *time* you woke up! They gave you that blood *hours* ago...and it didn't take them that long to find the bullet..."

"...what?" Cal blinked, gazing half-lidded at his fellow officer. *Was this still a dream? I better pinch myself just in case...*

"Well of *course* you had to be *O negative...*" Powell complained, expertly grinding Cal's gears into rusty cogs. "The Chief had to bend over *backwards* to find a donor..." Powell squinted over at Cal's hand, his pointer finger curling so he could pierce a nail into his palm. "W-



What...*what the hell* are you *doing*?!"

"*Nothing*..." he sighed, quickly removing the nail and going over what he last remembered. *Lights...sirens...the pain*. That same fear from before suddenly revisited him, everything dropping into place rather violently. "...w-what do you mean *find* somebody...?" Cal asked, his voice absent. His blue eyes were the only intense thing about him... everything else was lacking in all areas of strength and normalcy.

"...O negative...?" Powell repeated, eyeing him expectantly. Cal blinked twice. "...come *on* man! The *universal donor* doesn't even know his own blood type?!"

"*Yeah...I'm* the universal donor...*I know* that. So what?" Cal rebuked, fighting a dry feeling itch at his throat.

Powell shook his head, his grin broad and disbelieving, "...you can only receive your *own* type of blood."

Blinking at this, Cal hummed with realization, "*Oh*..."

Powell rolled his eyes, "Geez man...Hop had to find your *niece*. Then bring her all the way over from Kerley County..." Callahan suddenly hacked into his arm and Powell shot to his feet, filling a cup with water from the sink. "...I didn't even know kids *could* donate...I was sure there was an age limit..." He handed the cup to his breathless friend, nodding reassuringly. "Drink up. That's one thing the doctor said..."

Cal gulped down the cold, refreshing liquid, hissing agreeably. He regained his breaths, handing the cup back to Powell and shaking his head, "I don't have a niece."

On his way to the sink, Powell stopped, turning back to gaze at him, looking very confounded. "...what?"

"...I don't have a niece," Cal shrugged, wincing at the pain in his chest and peering down at himself. "Not yet anyways...*trust me*. If my brother ever found love, all of Indiana would hear about it..."

Powell squinted his eyes, pouring a second cup. "...but...the Chief *came in* with somebody who had the same blood type as you..."

Cal eagerly drank the water, holding the cup back out to Powell, his arm *straining* against the weight of gravity. The pain became too much and he dropped his arm to his side, the empty cup toppling onto the mattress. "...sorry..." Cal gave a meek mumble of an apology.

"That's fine...take it *easy*. Doctor's orders," Powell chuckled, a nervousness unexpectedly finding him amidst the gleefully charged atmosphere. *Cal was alive...talking and remembering things*. He couldn't *wait* to rub it in Flo's face (no, they hadn't made bets); she'd been more open to the idea of losing him. "...hopefully the Chief will...*explain* everything when he comes up to see you," Powell assured him over the sound of running water.

"P...P-Powell..." Cal beckoned him over, his eyes widening fearfully. The black man turned, eyeing him just in time to watch him *hurl all* over his sheets; most of it being the water he'd just inhaled.

"OH...um..." Powell leant out of the room. "CAN WE GET A NURSE IN HERE?" He raced back to Cal's side, handing him a clean bed pan. Bile and water seeped into the sheets, lukewarm against Cal's thighs. His partner sighed, "...at least you didn't get it in the wound." At that, Cal retched a second time into the bucket just as a young nurse flutter-stepped into the room.

Three bikes shuddered against the pavement, four shoes pushing their wheels determinedly. Lucas led the way with Will at his back; Dustin and Mike followed close behind. Lucas stopped at an intersection, the sound of rubber grinding against the blacktop meeting his ears. Will and he peered about, "...which way?"

"...um," Will looked over to Mike and Dustin. "...I-I think it's that way..." he pointed an unconvincing finger towards the right.

"What is it?" Mike spoke up, squinting in the sunlight. He could see Lucas rolling his eyes into the back of his skull at Will's guess.

"I thought you said you *knew* where it was!" he shot over his shoulder.

"Well, I do! I just..." Will stammered, pinching his brow worriedly.

"...I can't remember..."

Lucas scoffed as Dustin shook his head knowingly, "It's *this* way." He began biking to the left, the others taking a moment to watch him go, then hastily scrambling to follow.

"Are you sure?" Mike shouted.

"Positive!" Dustin tossed back, his legs straining against a certain hill.

Lucas eyed Mike, watching as the pale boy shrugged, Will snickering. "...I guess we'll find it *eventually*..." Will spoke up in an optimistic tone.

"I *knew* we should've made Nancy take us!" Lucas stressed, shaking his head.

"I asked! She said she had plans today..." Mike covered for his sister. After the events of last night, he couldn't find it in himself to despise her for the tiny things anymore...at least, not yet. *She'd helped Eleven...pretty much saved her.* He pursed his lips, drawing into himself pensively, missing those hands clutching his sides and the added weight on the back of his bicycle. *Oh well*, he thought. *Surely he'd see her soon. Will would anyway.*

"Yeah...Jonathan's gonna take her to a concert," Will added nonchalantly. Mike shot a glare at him as he grinned over Lucas' shoulder.

Lucas snickered on cue, "Ooooooh..."

Mike groaned, "*Ugh*...you guys are so gross...they're just *friends*."

"Hey, wouldn't it be weird if Jonathan and Nancy ended up getting *married*?" Lucas took it ten steps further, making Will shake his head and grin helplessly. "Wouldn't that make you and Mike...actual *brothers*?"

"...yeah I think so," Will nodded, both of them gazing at Mike as he tried ignoring this disgusting idea. Thinking about his sister marrying anyone...*ugh*. He didn't mind Jonathan – he favored him over Steve, that was for sure – but Nancy was just...insufferable sometimes.

Picturing her doing anything romantic just repulsed him, and his friends knew it all too well.

"Guys we're here!" Dustin shouted from the front, slowing down and stepping off his bike.

"Nancy and Jonathan sitting in a tree..." Lucas sung, wiggling his shoulders as they braked to a stop.

"...K-I-S-S-I-N-G," Will unexpectedly chimed in as Lucas clawed at Mike's patience. Dustin eyed them confusingly, having been too far ahead to catch their one-sided conversation.

"Guys *cut* it out!" Mike grimaced at the two as they clung to each other for support, giggling endlessly. "Nancy is...*ugh*..." Mike shuddered. "*Please* just stop!"

"Okay okay..." Will rolled his eyes endearingly, sighing to himself.

"I don't even wanna *know* what you guys are talking about..." Dustin shook his head, burrowing into his bag for the blood-stained clothing. "Now who has the change?"

"Me..." Mike stated quite meekly, digging into his pocket for the many coins. After breakfast, they'd searched Mike's *entire house* for loose change, even going as far as upturning sofa cushions. It was worth it though: they now had a whopping two dollars and seven cents. As Mike counted the coins in his palm, his thoughts drifting to that of Eleven, a man exited the tiny laundromat, stopping short behind the kids.

"Boys!"

Each of them spun around, their brows wide with surprise. "Oh," Mike voiced his shock. "Hey Mr. Clarke!"

"Morning guys!" he nodded, smiling warmly at his favorite students. His calm, dark eyes drifted over to the Byers' youngest. "Will! It's good to see you! You look well," he observed.

"Well, I feel a lot better," Will covered, smiling along with him.

"Hey, Mr. Clarke, I had a question to ask you..." Dustin broke in a little rudely.

"Sorry Dustin, I'm afraid I'll have to take a raincheck on this one. I've got a busy day ahead..."

"Oh, it'll only take a second!" Dustin swore, following him as he skirted the tight group.

Scott pursed his lips regretfully, "I'm sorry Dustin, but I *really* do have to go..."

Mike peered over at his friend as Lucas tapped him and hissed, "Just ask him *later*..."

"Well, it was nice seeing you!" Mike bid him a farewell as Will's eyes inadvertently went over their teachers' belongings.

Suddenly, those hazel eyes widened, recognizing the shape of something beneath the dry-cleaning bag, "Nice suit!"

Scott glanced down at it, smiling back up at Will, "Oh, thanks! Good observational skills. No wonder you're such a talented artist." As the boys smiled at Will, the man stood a moment, hesitating amidst his indecision...*had he asked them yet? He didn't think so...for some reason he couldn't remember.* His eyes squinted in thought, Mike recognizing that puzzled expression that graced his face so rarely. "...did I already tell you what the suit was for?"

Most of them shrugged or shook their heads. "...is it that one you wore to Will's funeral?" Dustin guessed.

Mr. Clarke scoffed good-naturedly as Dustin's friends eyed *daggers* at him. "Oh, no! No it's..." he rolled his eyes a tad. "...well, yes it's the same suit. But, it's not for a funeral. Can you boys guess what it is for?"

"...a...party?" Mike spoke. Mr. Clarke shook his head.

"...graduation?" Lucas chimed in with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Nope," Scott simpered, watching their minds work over the endless

possibilities.

"OOH! Is it for a bar mitzvah?" Dustin eagerly asked. They all eyed him a little incredulously, Mr. Clarke breaking into the widest of grins.

"Uh...nope," he chuckled. "Try again."

"...jury duty?" Mike asked, only to purse his lips as their teacher shook his head.

"...is it for a science competition?" Will deduced.

"Good guess, but no..." Scott reluctantly shook his head. He eyed them all like a game-show host, "...any more guesses?" The boys eyed the ground, defeat plastered across all their faces, their shoulders sagging. Scott smiled knowingly, "Well I guess I haven't told you guys yet...hmm..."

"...told us what?" Lucas politely pressed, anxious to know the answer.

"Well...it's a tad complicated..." Mr. Clarke began. "...normally, I'd be asking your parents first...but I think you guys can handle it." They watched him with wondering eyes as he prepared himself. "...boys, I'd like you all to come to my wedding." Their eyes lit up excitedly, a chorus of gasps passing along the group. "*Just*...try and keep this off the record and out of the school. We wouldn't want any other students to be getting jealous..."

"Mister *Clarke*!" Lucas cooed playfully, wiggling his eyebrows at him in a bold gesture.

"Lucas!" he eyed him sternly as Lucas immediately dropped his grin.

"...sorry..." he mumbled.

To their surprise, Mr. Clarke chuckled to himself, "...just pulling your leg. It's alright. I couldn't be happier..." They watched him dreamily gaze off into the distance for a short moment, then return his focus on them. "Her name is Jun, and she is *very* excited to meet you guys."

"Really?!" Mike asked, astounded. The others tried containing their

exhilaration. They'd *never* been to a wedding before, and for someone like Mr. Clarke...it just promised too much of a good time.

"Yep! She's heard *all* about how smart you boys are...and to tell you the truth..." he leant in and lowered his voice, the boys craning their necks to listen in. "...she might even be smarter than *me*."

"*What?!*" Dustin scoffed.

"No way!" Mike shook his head disbelievingly as Will grinned widely.

"It's true. She's a scientist boys...a *real* scientist. She gets to work with plants every day!" As Scott enthused, they eyed him a little confusingly. "Well...she's a...botanist. Still, she's the *smartest* and most beautiful woman I've *ever* had the pleasure of meeting."

The boys fumbled with their words, inwardly tripping over themselves to try and find the right way to express their delight. "Well...congratulations!" Will finally spoke up, smiling widely.

"-y-yeah! We're *so* happy for you!" Lucas added as Mike eagerly nodded.

"Oh, thanks guys. I'm just glad I finally found her..." he trailed off, smiling warmly at them all. "...I'm actually kind of nervous," he confessed. This struck them all as odd.

"Nervous?" Lucas repeated with a scoff. "About what?"

"Well..." Mr. Clarke trailed off, pursing his lips. They all eyed him as if he'd just introduced mitochondrial functions to them...but he thought he could see a glimmer of understanding in Michael's eyes. "...don't worry! You'll understand when you're older."

As Mike held his gaze, the others peered down unconvincingly. Dustin chuckled a droning laugh, "I seriously *doubt* that..."

"*Oh*...don't be foolish!" Mr. Clarke waved a hand at them, raising their downturned gazes. "Any girl would be *lucky* to have *any one* of you at their side. Keep in mind; your body is just a vessel. A person's *real* worth lies in the power of their *mind*. Brains over brawn..." he trailed off, trying to convince them of their real worth. "I wouldn't

worry too much about it either. You boys have *plenty* of time ahead of you..." They smiled gratefully at him as he added, "Just be sure not to waste it."

"We won't!" Dustin assured him, beaming toothily. They all regarded Mr. Clarke in a different light now, inwardly paying him the *highest* respects. Each boy took this information with him...except for Mike. For some reason, the man's words had only twisted the boy's heart into a tightly wound knot. He kept thinking back to that kiss in the cafeteria, his face shading a deep red and his pulse quickening.

Mr. Clarke eyed the silent boy, "...y-you okay there Mike?" To his horror, his friends all eyed him, their shrewd smiles grating against his sanity.

"-yeah! I'm fine!" he lied, his voice croaking awkwardly.

Scott chuckled, "Well, I'll call all of your parents tonight and give them the date. I hope all of you can make it. It'd mean a lot to me."

"Us too!" Dustin nodded eagerly along with his friends.

"Yeah! It'll be so much fun!" Will enthused.

Mr. Clarke nodded at them in a polite farewell, "Have a great day boys. And be *safe*. I'll see you next week, enjoy your break!"

"We will!" the wizard called after him as he walked towards his car. He turned to eye his friends, "...did anybody know Mr. Clarke had a girlfriend?"

They exchanged mischievous smiles, except for Mike; his legs were trembling anxiously. "I did!" Dustin announced. "I stayed after to study with him one time and I saw her picture on his desk."

"What's she look like?" Lucas asked as Will smiled to himself.

Before Dustin could answer, Mike bounced to a start and called after him, "Hey Mr. Clarke!" Hanging his suit above the back seat, he turned to watch Mike rush towards him, a question behind those dark brown eyes. "...would it be alright if we...brought somebody else too?"



Scott puzzled this, "Hmm...I don't see why not. Who is it?"

"O-Oh, um..." Mike took a moment to rekindle this memory, peering back at his friends almost searchingly, as if he would see her standing beside them all, mouthing her alias in a silent gesture. The three boys eyed him very confusingly, too far away to overhear. "...remember, Eleanor?" Mike chanced Mr. Clarke's brain.

The man squinted his eyes at this, "Hmm...I *believe* so. She's the one from...Sweden, correct?"

"Oh...*yeah!*" Mike hastily nodded, having completely forgotten that part.

"Of course! I'm sure we can fit her in, and there'll be enough food there to feed an army," Mr. Clarke chuckled lightheartedly. "...Eleanor didn't strike me as one to eat much, so I'm sure we'll have enough," he joked.

"Oh...you'd be *surprised*..." Mike chuckled knowingly. When Mr. Clarke eyed him quizzically, Mike's smile quickly dropped. "Um...okay! T-Thanks! I'll...see you later!"

"...take care, Mike," Scott called after the bizarre child as he rushed back to his friends. They looked like they were either scolding or questioning him as they entered the laundromat. Mr. Clarke smiled to himself, suddenly recalling what had struck him as odd about meeting them here. *Did one of their washers break? Why were they... here?* He blinked skeptically, shrugging to himself and shaking his head. He focused on driving back to his fiancé, blissfully unaware of what the boys were really up to.

"...what was *that*?" Lucas prompted, watching the pale boy glaringly.

"I was just asking if El could come along..." Mike replied easily, stepping up to a washer with the rest of them. Dustin began unzipping his bag, pursing his lips at the bloodied clothing that lay within. It was wrapped in a thick, garbage bag, but he still refused to touch it, the thought of blood on his skin unnerving him to no end.

Lucas' shoulders drooped instinctively, "...really Mike?"

The boy turned to glare back, "What?!"

"Well, if the Bad Men are alive, I'm pretty sure it'd be dangerous to be bringing her *anywhere*," Dustin reasoned as Mike blinked back this reasonable notion.

"They can't get her. They don't even know where she is!" he shot back, his brow creasing angrily. He wanted her to go with them. It would **suck** if she had to stay at one of their houses alone while they all enjoyed Mr. Clarke's new marriage. Dustin's hesitation irked him and he promptly reached into the bag, hoisting the plastic out.

"Did she ever tell you how she got back?" Lucas interrogated him, his friends turning to Mike, awaiting an answer.

The Dungeon Master lowered his eyes to the ground, "...no." Their gazes held with his as he righted himself, trying to cling to some sense of hope. "But it doesn't matter! She's back now. They probably don't even know..." Ironically enough, Mike found it hard to believe his own words, as if he were saying them just to convince himself and not them. Lucas shook his head as Will lowered his gaze. "Let's just do this..." Mike tried to switch the subject, opening the bag and grabbing the clothes. Dustin's eyes widened as Mike's hand gripped the stained shirt, tossing them into the washer. Pursing his lips and creasing his brow, Mike inserted a quarter, two dimes and a nickel into the coin slot. As soon as Will was finished scooping some powdery detergent inside, he shut the door with a slam. With a press of a button, the washer began to rotate and hum. Will's button-down night shirt tumbled alongside one of Karen's bath towels, and they watched as the rushing water dyed a pinkish color, eventually deepening into a watery red, then washing out completely.

The knob *crashed* into an obstructive wall, the door swinging into his house and bouncing back disagreeably. *Yep...there was definitely a dent there now.* Moonlight poured into his house, the only source of light for him at the moment. His arm stood cocked beside him, the weight of his gun like ice in his right hand. Hop took one step inside, peering down at the floor anxiously and noting his shoe's firm hold on the wood. It lay bare, unnaturally shiny and clean...*how long did it take them to do this?* "Jesus..." Hop blinked back that gory image of Lonnie's dead face, his brain obliterated against the inside of Hop's

door. Thinking of that, Hop gripped the edge of it with his free hand, peering around the corner to eye the surface. A fresh dent clung to the opposing wall, but the door itself looked brand new, brown and (mostly) spotless...except for one tiny variation. Hop crouched down, exhaling as he further inspected the tiny bullet hole puncturing the wood. His fingers outlined it, fingerprints dragging against the timbers. Those blue eyes hung hollow in their sockets, tired and uneasy. *Lonnie died...right here, where I'm crouching.*

He shook his head, rising to his feet and toughing through the vomit that threatened to come up. He turned, gun raised at a bent elbow, peering about the rest of his dark home. He'd done what he needed to do, and that didn't mean they were done with him. Blinking warily at the shadows, he reached back and flicked a light switch. To his astonishment, the room illuminated in a barely-comforting cast of light. *Figures they should fix the power...God forbid he should go without a telephone.* He couldn't lie...Hopper had accumulated quite a distaste for all things technological, and in this booming day and age, he only had The Department of Energy to thank for that. At least now he could see everything...laying in ruins, just as he'd left it. Hop wasn't exactly the *neatest* homeowner. Crossing the room, Hop set his gun on the table and cleared a spot on the sofa, tossing some foul-smelling blankets across the room in a flurry. Reaching back for his gun, Hop's hand froze, his eyes locking onto something else and feeling instantly anxious. A chill shot through his spine, reaching up to grasp his throat and dig it's nails into his nape.

There was his grandfather's hat, resting delicately on his cluttered coffee table...unassuming and familiar.

*They were here.* Hop could now clearly remember leaving the hat *right* behind that man in the grey suit...and he suddenly felt sick to his stomach. *No. He was here.* Brenner was one thing...he at least came by his cruelty honestly. That man...that, *cheeky bastard* spoke with such disillusionment that it made Hop's stomach coil. *It was probably just the way Brenner wanted him...brainwashed into thinking he was doing something good.* His eyes never left the hat as he slowly realized a part of him never wanted to wear it again...not even touch it.

Hop shook his head, fighting to keep his stomach under check. With a deliberate blink, he gazed about the room, beads of sweat

conglomerating on his skin. He peered around at all of the replaced lightbulbs, furniture, telephones, lamps, and cushions he'd spent months saving up for...and sighed resignedly, "...you've gotta be kidding me."

Saving demolition time for later, Jim snatched his gun off the table, stomping into his bedroom and checking the perimeter. His bed promised him the rest he craved so desperately, but Hop wouldn't even consider it; not when his blood was pumping and his heart beat so violently against his sternum. He left, going on to check the bathroom and closet. Saving the deck for last, he stepped out into the chilled March night, shivering against the air. His finger lingered over the trigger as he spun about chaotically, his eyes darting every which way. Finally satisfied with his hectic search, he lowered his gun to his side, taking a moment to inhale the crisp air into his lungs. Then, he rushed back through his home, crossing his lawn and opening his car door.

Folding the passenger seat, he unbuckled her, hoisted her up and out, then hefted her into his arms. Eleven's head hung back in an alarming manner, so he shouldered it into his chest, kicking the car shut on his way. Hop stumbled into his home, placing her delicately onto the sofa, then crossing the room to slam and *lock* his door. *As if that really mattered*, he thought. Anxious, he returned to her, blue eyes bursting with queries. He sighed, resituating her so she was on her right side, facing the wall. With her back to him, he lifted the shirt up and gaped at the bandages, seeping with blood. *No wonder she passed out*. Like a machine, his eyes tore about the room, and he bolted to his closet, extracting a dusty first-aid kit and returning to her within seconds. Something told Hop to elevate her feet, so he did, stacking a few of the fragrant blankets and stray pillows beneath her feet. It was a little awkward to do this while she was on her side, but once Hop was finished with...*whatever* he was preparing to fix, he could make the necessary adjustments.

It took Hop half an hour to unwrap the gauze, stare at those *monstrous* lacerations sweeping her back, stop the bleeding as best he could, sanitize it (thank God she couldn't feel the stinging), and try to recreate the same wrap with brand new bandages. Her shirt had been replaced with one of Hop's old ones...*unfathomably* large and a dark

sage on her small frame. He didn't think she would care. Hop gently turned her onto her back, propping her feet onto the pillows and covering her with blanket after blanket, tucking them in around her sides. When he was finally finished, she looked so warm and comfortable it made *him* sleepy...but he refused to close his eyes for even a moment. Hopper hoped she could feel this warmth, wherever her subconscious had taken her. He needed to monitor Eleven...to be there when she woke up...he wouldn't allow himself to even consider an if.

A nervous hand smoothed over her forehead as he glared through the window, out into the night. His entire demeanor was guarded, spent entirely on ensuring her safety. *They gave you a week, calm down.* Hop clenched his teeth and seethed like a simmering teapot; angry with Brenner, furious with himself and even more distraught over Callahan's unknown condition. *She was still so cold...* his hand pressed against her forehead and he shook his head. Her breaths were the only thing calming him down, though a great distance lay between each shallow exchange.

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: Thank you guys so much for reading! I greatly appreciate all of your comments! They mean a lot to me. I hope you enjoyed this chapter. I tried toning it down a little – but not *too* much because of well...**everything** – so hopefully it was a nice change of pace. A bit brighter, if you will.

Mr. Clarke is one of my favorite characters. I mean, they're all great in their own ways but if I had Mr. Clarke as my science teacher, FORGET IT! He obviously deserves Best Teacher of the Year Award, like come on now...

## 29. Unsung Heroes

### Chapter Twenty-Nine – Unsung Heroes

Hours had passed, the passage of time merciless against the overabundance of questions and unexplored curiosities. Sunlight penetrated his tiny lakeside home, oozing in through the windows like golden honey. A small hand lingered from beneath two blankets, dangling precariously over the edge of a couch. Those dainty fingers twitched against her subconscious, and the sound of a man's calm breathing brought her to a hazy state of cognizance. As her head swam with vertigo, she was horrified to find that something was *smothering* her! The many blankets he'd tucked her into now choked her in a chaotic frenzy, but she lacked the strength to even consider throwing them off. She could only breathe and whimper beneath their frighteningly close fibers, trying to understand what was beneath her feet and where she was. *That was something else entirely.*

She peered about the room, wide-eyed and frightened. Mumbling amidst her terror, she eyed the overturned lamps and the perfect stripes on the couch and the cluttered tables. It all looked very... disheveled; everything laying in the ominous aftermath of some perfectly reckless force of nature. Using her continually wearing energy, she turned her head to peer across the room. What used to be an eating place now lay in shambles, a mess of chairs and dirty dishes. Then she saw it. *The door.* That was her way out of here... wherever here was. Her heart sped up a bit and her limbs flooded with energy...but she had to be careful. Eleven wasn't chancing anything this time.

Mindfully, she wiggled her fingers. She swiveled her wrists and ankles, slowly but surely working her way along her extremities, testing their flexibility. Eventually, she made it all the way to her core, everything before that point functioning properly. There was a weakness that seemed to emanate from her entire torso, but El figured she was just hungry. *Did I use my powers?* She didn't think so...*no.* That needle came back to her...the red rubber ball. It was like her fingers were still curled around it, twitching against thin air. Something about the redness of the ball scratched at her memory and

she immediately remembered the blood bag. She blinked, nose and mouth covered reservedly beneath the heavy blankets. Her eyes trailed to the door once again, her brow creasing worriedly. A tiny hole shot a ray of sunshine into the sleepy shade of the room, beckoning her to venture outdoors.

El's heart suddenly caught in her throat, realizing she could make it out of here, all by herself. *If she just took that first step, she was certain she could make the rest. She'd done it before...* her foot slid off the pile of pillows, dropping like a stone onto the floral patterned rug. A sharp pain shot through her back and she winced, gritting her teeth and fighting hard to shove the blankets off. With each sluggish movement, there was more pain and more dizziness, but Eleven wasn't stopping. She didn't know where she was or who was here with her...and she didn't want to find out. Some ignorant part of her was *confident* she could find her way back to Joyce or Mike...

...and then, by the time she'd sat up against the couch, the blankets lying in a defeated heap by her side, that exhaustion consumed her and she suddenly wasn't so certain. *What if she got lost again and couldn't find any food?* Trying to steady herself, those tiny hands gripping the sides of the couch for support, El started shivering excessively, her limbs quivering with some unforeseen cold. She looked down at herself. *What was this shirt?!* She reached an arm back and felt the bandages clinging to her, wrapped a tad more securely. *These feel new...who did that?!* Her lips parted, El's breathing coming out ragged and harsh, some wave of fatigue smacking her like a drought. She whimpered, her throat stinging with an arid dryness. *Water.* It was suddenly all she wanted.

Dragging herself to her feet, some invisible force brought her to her knees, slamming her side into the coffee table. With a barely subdued shriek, she clutched the top surface like a lion digging its claws into stone. Her fingers brushed a chilled aluminum can and she gasped, pulling herself up so she could rest her chin against the table and eye the drink. The can sat mostly white with a red label: *Schlitz; the beer that made Milwaukee famous.* Eleven blinked at these new words... *what are Schlitz? And who is Milwaukee?* Desperate for water, she reached out and snatched the can from its spot, exposing a ring of condensation underneath. Uncharacteristically forgetting to give it

the smell test, she thirstily drank the sour liquid, foaming against her taste buds. Her eyelids fluttered and she cringed, shaking her head and retching disagreeably. It was easily *the* grossest thing she'd ever tasted...and Eleven wasn't one to turn down food or drink, despite the taste. She ate for sustenance, and when she could afford to...she allowed herself to savor the tastes. But this was horrible! *How could people drink that?!* Groaning, she inadvertently spits it onto the carpet, gritting her teeth and shivering again.

The sound of the can dropping against the table woke him with a start and he gripped his gun, blinking against the blinding radiance that invaded his windows. He'd watched her for most of the night, sitting in a red living chair in the corner, prepared to shoot anyone who walked in. It was a brilliant vantage point, tucked neatly within the shadows and within eye line of both doorway entrances. But he too had needs; Hop had passed out within minutes of seating himself in that comfy chair, lack of sleep sending him into hibernation mode. Now, he was wide awake – which was a miracle all by itself – and standing, going over her like a hawk with his eyes. She turned, glaring angrily at him, and then recognizing that look of relief painting his face. He sighed deeply, lowering his weapon, "...how do you feel?"

El swayed a bit, her legs still folded beneath her as she replied with that trademark glare. Something about the way she regarded him sent uncertain chills racing over his skin, blood rushing to his face. Hop hadn't even noticed the can of beer until now, leaking sideways onto the carpet, pooling onto the table. The puzzle came together and he flicked his eyes back to her, his mouth hanging agape. "...did you drink that?" His heart pitched painfully as her glower dropped, splitting open and revealing all her insecurities to him. She felt like sobbing, like throwing him across the room and escaping back to Joyce...but she knew she wouldn't be fast enough. The way her legs twitched...she wouldn't get very far. Eleven still had trouble accepting that fact. Hop stared into her folding face, starting towards her just as her frail body shut down, having exerted itself past its limits. The Chief crouched beside her, keeping the crook of her neck from hitting the table as she folded onto her side. The last thing she saw in all her stunted clarity was him, leaning over her with frightened eyes of blue. He watched that well-placed glare neutralize,



slowly fading out...along with the rest of her.

*That familiar haunting noise played itself out in a ticking rhythm, incessant and echoing about this endless place of darkness. Eleven turned, shivering at how easily she'd found it against the void. Water lapped noisily against her feet, threatening to give her away...but it did not turn. It didn't seem to know she was even there, despite the sounds of water trickling with her every step. As she drew closer to the feasting monster, her pulse quickened and her limbs quivered. Goosebumps ravaged her skin and those chocolate eyes broadened alarmingly. "I want you to find it... understand?" Papa's words plagued her in this place of nothingness, and Eleven stopped to stand behind it, swallowing a nervous lump and trying not to run. She reached a tentative hand out, mere inches from its soggy, warped back. Against all of Papa's coaxing and persuasion, she paused, that trembling hand so close to its clammy skin. Her breath came in shaky waves and El stood, frozen in place with that outstretched arm. Pursing her lips against this hesitation, she pressed her fingers into its back. Within seconds, she'd come to regret this decision.*

*The monster did an about face, baring its many rows of teeth and parting those petal like lips as it braced for battle. That roar sent electric currents through her body in a chain reaction and something new clicked in her brain. Opening her eyes, practically **wrenching** herself from the darkness, she could still hear its howl echoing about in her cranium. All she wanted was for it to stop...to send it away somewhere. Her own screech tore from her ribcage, that animalistic fear painting itself on the walls just outside the tank like manic artists. Every light in the basement flickered; the very room **quaked** beneath that unrestrained power as obscure claws raked themselves along the tiles, crumbling them like soup crackers. Bits of the ceiling plunged to the floor above the pull of Eleven's terror, threatening to crush anyone who lingered beneath.*

*An associate slammed his hand into a large red button and an alarm sounded, casting over her screeching dissonance. Brenner and his men clamored about for the exit, bolting this way and that, easily forgetting about the child who was still in the tank, belting out the remaining air in her lungs. Their shouts rang low under Eleven's scream, and despite her best attempts at breaking the glass, it held firm beneath her fists. An unprecedented amount of blood smeared her nostrils as her fatigue finally gripped her. It left her grasping the sides of her helmet for support when*

suddenly the glass window flung itself open! A man peered in, sweaty and juddering around his fears. Eleven hardly recognized him in this state, clinging desperately to the oxygen mask for support. "Matthew! They're leaving us!"

The doctor turned to eye his colleague who was hastily beckoning him to the door. "She's still in here!" he called back over the crunching slates and blaring sirens. His hands were splayed against the glass, and he could tell she was spent. Glaring streaks of scarlet hung below her nostrils, smearing every which way. A harsher screech of a sound met the men's ears, like something was trying to burst through the wall, doggedly stubborn.

Ross shook his head and rushed to his side, "Matt, they've left us behind! We need to evacuate **now**!"

"We can't leave her!" was Matt's only reply as he wrenched himself away from the window, hurtling up the stairs. "Don't you see?! This is her **chance**!" Matthew insisted in a hysteric tone.

"What are you talking about!?" Ross demanded, gesturing about frantically. "We have to leave!" Eleven heard none of this, trapped inside the chamber, inside her helmet; inside her own head, threatening to pull her under. If she fell asleep here, she could drown, so she fought to stay awake. Both men knew this to be true, and Matt struggled with the wheel.

"H-Help me!" he demanded, glaring at a confounded Ross. With a chary shake of his head, the gruff man finally raced up those steps, latching onto the wheel and twisting it with all his might. With a hiss, the sensory-deprivation tank opened and Eleven faintly recognized those brilliant rays of light cascading beautifully into the water. They were intermittent, blinking on, then off. She blinked slow and deliberate at the twinkling reds and yellows as the men struggled with the ladder above.

Ross slammed his fingers into the button and sparks shot out of the mechanism. He reared back, covering his face, "The ladder's disabled! We've lost power..."

Matt pursed his lips, the deafening noises coming from the wall momentarily ceasing, as if whatever was on the other side was suddenly too exhausted to continue. The sirens never let up and Matthew breathed evenly for a second. "...then we'll just have to pull her out ourselves."

Determinedly, the doctor shed his coat, tossing it beside him on the platform. "Go down to the window, get her attention, and tell her to hold onto the helmet," Matt instructed. "She can't hear you, so use your hands to-"

"-why don't we just **break** the glass?!" Ross demanded in an incredulous tenor. Since when did this experiment take priority over their own safety?!

"We **CAN'T**! If this room stays intact, then they'll **know** we helped her! We need to make it look like she...l-like she disappeared into thin air..." Matt explained, reaching down into the bubbling waters and gripping the top of her helmet. El's eyes instinctively widened at this sudden shift, hastily gripping the sides and whimpering with fright.

"Matthew...it's too **late** for her," Ross shook his head, those furious blotches returning to his pale skin. He crouched beside the doctor, going on in a persuasive tone, "...it's not too late for **us**. We can leave **now** and be **safe**."

"From day one, I was tasked with **ensuring** her **survival**..." Matthew spoke in a low sigh. Ross flinched when the doctor slammed his open palm into the metal floor, "That's what I'm gonna do!" Ross was beginning to act just like the men they were working for, and it disgusted him. "...at **least** do it for her!"

After a moment of seething contempt, Ross wordlessly shot to his feet, rushing to the front of the tank. Through hazy eyes, Eleven noticed a man banging on the glass, eyeing him confusingly. He motioned about with his hands, two clamped fists raised to either side of his head. Eleven's grip never lessened from the onset of her enervation, and before she could even begin to comprehend his message, she was being yanked out of the bath! Her eyes shot wider as water threatened to fill her helmet, lapping at her chest and shoulders. This **wasn't** a part of the normal procedure, and she whimpered with fright as she left the water, kicking against the waves and white knuckling the helmet. Matt struggled beneath the weight of the mask, Ross joining him until they'd dragged her out completely. Even then, she wouldn't let go, so Ross had to peel her fingers from around the sides. "Get it off her..." Matt grunted, lifting the enormous mass from her shoulders. Once it cleared her skull, they dropped it back into the tank with a splash and Eleven sulked against a yellow guard rail, nearly drained. She eyed the familiar-looking doctor, panting with fright and

stumbling to her feet, preparing to bolt. Ross instinctively gripped her shoulders, holding her in place beside the tank as Matthew resignedly closed the lid.

"N-No!" she yelped, skin still moist from her time in the bath. The soles of her feet slid mercilessly against the metal platform, her toes occasionally slipping between the cracks. Ross did nothing to calm her, too wound up on his own to even be capable of soothing another person...much less someone who feared his very presence. She could see Matthew reaching into his jacket for something, and that familiar glint of a hypodermic needle made her shriek with fright, "NO!"

Ross cursed as Eleven miraculously slipped from his grasp, "SHIT!"

"Grab her!" Matthew demanded, pointing hastily as she ran down the stairs. The wall shuddered beneath the Demogorgon's weight, and Eleven skid to a stop before the soon-to-be gateway, marveling at how the concrete surged towards her in a voracious manner. Suddenly, Ross' hands were gripping her again, forcing her to the floor with a screech. Her shoulder blades scraped against the concrete, that weighted suit doing **nothing** to aid her in her efforts.

"I got her!" Ross proclaimed, pinning her down with his forearm. His eyes warned her not to try anything, and yet...he was not aware of what she could do. She suddenly fixated her glare on his eyes, and Ross felt an odd, bone-jarring sensation surge throughout his core. Ghostly hands were passing over him, searching for a weak spot that she could use to her advantage. Unaware of the turmoil in which his partner was currently entombed, Matt wearily approached them, decidedly prepping a needle. Rendered motionless before her glare, Ross watched from the corner of his eye as Matthew **stabbed** that needle into the girl's thigh. Those hazel eyes widened and she yelped, effectively breaking her concentration and lashing out at the doctor with a pruned foot. Shrugging off the futile kicks, he latched onto her leg and pinned it down with the rest of her.

Miraculously enough, Ross could breathe again, his eyelids rapidly fluttering as he shook his head and gasped in mouthfuls of air. "...that better be **bear** tranquilizer," he groaned, fighting against her futile struggle.

"No...she's not about to cooperate with us, but we **need** to get her out of

here," Matthew repeated, trying to ignore the disdain Ross obviously held for the frightened little girl.

"**NO...s-stop!**" her yells dipped in volume as her body went limp against their arms, slumping into the floor. As she slipped out of consciousness, both men instantly relaxed, eagerly releasing her at the draw of the needle. Ross gazed at the wall fretfully, his brown eyes lost and somehow changed. Reasonably so, he felt sick to his stomach with questions. He didn't know what had just happened to him...Brenner made it a point to hide the workers' deaths from members of the same unit, **especially** when Eleven was their undertaker. This gave Brenner quite the mysterious, menacing distinction amongst his men, the popular consensus being that if he was betrayed, the consequences would be fatal. Still, as Ross regarded the unconscious child, he **knew** Martin would need them too much to want to execute them left and right. Remembering how she'd been staring at him, those dangerous eyes locked with his...an idea posed itself to him; perhaps she wasn't as helpless as they thought. If she could crush a soda can and intercept radio waves...what else could she do?

Matt clasped his shoulder starkly, "Listen...I **need** you to take her upstairs. If we're lucky, the elevator is still working..." They peered about at the flickering lights, jumping back as the wall undulated suddenly, cracking open behind some unimaginable force. Matt yelled, "Take her! Go!"

"What about you?!" Ross demanded, gripping the child and hoisting her over his shoulder.

Matthew shuddered, his fear painting over him with each bead of sweat. "...I-I'm going to knock the cameras offline...that way...they won't know it was us who helped her escape..."

Ross eyed him incredulously, shaking his head in misunderstanding, "**HOW** does setting **her** loose help **us**?"

"She's **our** subject, Ross! We're out of a **job** without her!" Matthew stressed, gesturing frantically to the sleeping girl. "...isn't that what you wanted?"

"They'll just assign us to a different one! You **know** that!" Ross blinked, a particularly loud crunching noise splintering the atoms of the wall and

causing them both to flinch. He continued poking holes in Matt's righteous plan, finding it all disgustingly risky. "If you wanted to be done with her, you shoulda just let her drown in that tank!"

Seething through bared teeth, Matt stood, meeting him at eye-level, "And who would Martin blame for her death?" Matthew shook his head, shouting above the din, "What if she was your sister Ross?!"

"She's **not!**" Ross returned fire, creasing his brow against this ridiculous argument. "Don't GO there!"

"But what if she WAS?" Matthew demanded, his eyes growing wide with alarm. "...this is her **chance!** Who are we to deny her freedom?!"

"Matt..." Ross shook his head. If he'd known how preachy and nauseatingly sappy his friend was, he may not have liked him as much. This man was asking him to risk his **life** and his **job** for a damn test subject...and for **what?** "This is gonna get us **killed!**"

"Please, go now...put her in something dry and just...get her out of here... I don't care where you take her. Just get her off property grounds..." Matthew plead, eyeing the wall derisively. Turning back to Ross, he unexpectedly shoved the gruffer man, "WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?!" A new sound clashed upon their ears as the Demogorgon drew close, now able to hear their words echoing through the portal. Both men stared in horrified awe, and without any further argument, Ross sprinted away, hefting the girl over his shoulder like a sack of flour. As they both ran, one of them taking the elevator to relative safety, Matthew burst into the control room. To his great relief, he found that disabling the cameras was unnecessary. All of East Hawkins had just lost power...a frighteningly enormous prospect Matt decidedly saved for later introspection. A back-up generator was currently running on fumes to fuel all exits and emergency lights...including the elevators. Matt exhaled, reentering the room with the tank. He froze in his tracks, sucking in his breath at what he saw.

The wall had finally split apart, some kind of translucent web-like filament covering the crack, like tendons between muscle. A pollen-like dust mothballed about the room, drifting like snow on a lazy winter day. Matt took one step closer, peering into the divide and discerning the hazy outline of someone...**standing on the other side!** This figure was unimaginably tall and lanky; its growl made Matthew's teeth chatter.

Mindlessly, the doctor pitched free of the exam room, skating down the hall and feverishly slamming his open palm into the call button. He did a double take, peering down the corridor with much bated apprehension. He'd tell himself, perhaps it had been a trick of the lighting. Then he'd right his thoughts, having faith in his own perceptions. Matt was **sure** he'd seen it standing there, just behind that slimy film, ungodly thin and towering. But he **knew** that was a solid wall...there were no rooms in that direction. This dreamlike pandemonium bewildered him as the elevator finally opened, and he rushed inside, furiously tapping another button. An unnerving growl echoed down the hall and shook him to his bones. He'd just righted himself, taking some much-needed inhales when he slowly peered up...into the face of the monster.

The elevator doors opened and Ross peered out. The alarm echoed cacophonous about the building, flashing lights poking him in the eyes. Unsurprisingly enough, each hall lay barren and bodiless. Ross didn't stop to wonder where they'd gone, thankful for the lack of blank stares and dead eyes. He burst into the laundry room, fetching one of the many hospital gowns from a jumbled heap. Absentmindedly changing her into the dry clothing, he hefted her back over his shoulder, muttering something unintelligible to himself and heading towards the dark room. Her weighted suit lay discarded and waterlogged on the floor, waiting to be found by Brenner and his associates. Standing before the open chamber, he found himself unable to throw her inside...Matthew's words suddenly crashing into him like a ton of bricks. Ross glanced down the hall, considering his scarcity of options.

He knew that if he did this and Brenner found out...they'd likely have him killed. This subject was not to leave department grounds or step foot outside...**ever**; Brenner had deemed it so. He reckoned she wouldn't last long out there anyway, with no one looking out for her. He didn't know her backstory like Brenner did, or like Hopper would come to know. All he knew was her terrifying present...and suddenly he heard a noise in the distance, his ears straining over the alarm. He picked up the shuffling of the elevator doors. "Matt..." Ross breathed, walking with the girl on his shoulder and peering round the corner. As the gruff man looked on, his heart stopped, and he nearly dropped the girl to the floor.

Streaks of blood colored the inside of the elevator a fantastic red, a pair of shoes and shreds of clothing the only remainder of his old friend. Then, a

*monstrous growl rocked him to his core. Poignant fear surged through him with every beat of his heart, so Matt turned and bolted out of the complex, crossing the compound and stopping to gaze about. The darkness hit him harshly, clouds grouping together and blocking out the stars, anxiously awaiting tomorrow night's storm. As he backed away from the towering building, his heel scraped the side of a flood-drain and he nearly tripped, gripping the child tighter. Stumbling around to eye the tunnel, he stole a quick glance at the girl, his eyes deep with worry.*

*"...who are we to deny her freedom?" Matt's words came back to him like a dream. He pursed his lips, crouching to lay her within the tight space, cursing to himself all the while. He had to leave. If anyone saw him or even suspected him of this treachery...Ross didn't want to learn what "dispatch" meant for men like Matthew; for men like **him**. He adjusted her so she was as concealed as possible, and once he was satisfied with how far he'd gotten her into the cave-like entrance, he shot to his feet and raced to the parking lot. Ross fumbled with the keys to his pickup, checking the backseat for his shotgun before speeding out of the compound, leaving the gate open on his way out.*

The dryer tumbled to a stop, and Will opened it, confidently reaching inside. "Finally!" Dustin exclaimed, scooching himself off an inactive washer. They all released a collective sigh as Will handed Mike the clean rag, examining his sleep shirt as it lay warm between his fingers. "It's like they were never bloody!" Dustin enthused, smiling at Will as the boy grinned back.

"...can we go now?" Lucas asked, straining to hold the door open against the unforgiving winds.

"Yeah," Will agreed as they headed towards the exit, pushing the glass door open. Once outside, the wind buffeted all of them, merciless and sharp. The trees swayed beneath those crushing currents, bending at impossible angles. Mike peered up into the grey sky, blanketed over with thick, fluffy clouds. If they didn't know any better, they'd think it was still early Winter. Each of them grimaced at this oddity, exchanging confused glances.

"Where did this come from?" Dustin asked, pushing his voice over the wind. When they'd biked here this morning, it'd been a clear day with sparse clouds and gentle winds. Now, Dustin was lucky he had his hat



on; it was like the sky was reaching down just to tousle his friends' hair and manhandle the trees. Dustin grinned at them all as Lucas squinted against the air.

"Let's just go before it gets worse!" he demanded, turning to grab his bike. They all followed, stopping in their tracks just as he had once they saw their emptied tires, sagging into the blacktop. Deep gashes lay interred upon each one, like tattoos...spiteful and permanent.

Mike furrowed his brow, his gaze quickly flicking everywhere at once. Will followed suit, those hazel eyes widening with panic. "What happened?" Dustin asked, trying to keep his billowing hair out of his eyes.

Lucas crouched down, puffing his cheeks angrily. Dustin knelt as well only to wrench back when Lucas shoved his bike onto its side in a fit of rage. "Somebody slashed our tires!" he shouted, glaring at each passing car.

"Are you kidding me?!" Dustin exclaimed, reaching for one of the deflated tires as if in mourning. "Oh damnit..." he shook his head, curls swaying gently with each movement. After a pent up sigh, Dustin rubbed the bridge of his nose and groaned, "My dad's gonna *kill* me..."

"We may as well start walking..." Will suggested, his voice empty and tired. Dustin sighed again hopelessly, inspecting the damage done to their bikes and wondering if they could still be used.

"This is **bullshit!**" Lucas threw his hands to his sides, waiting for Mike to react in some way besides staring out into the street like a startled deer. He watched each car, those dark eyes wide with something Lucas couldn't immediately recognize. "Mike...are you even *seeing* this?"

"Yes Lucas, I *saw* it," he shot back, still eyeing the road. "Someone did this on *purpose*."

Dustin quickly caught on, "...you think they're still around?"

"They better not be..." Lucas fumed. They all gazed about, the one

with the hat squinting against each piercing gust. This great wind was gradually picking up, curling the branches of the weakest trees like rubber bands. The boys began to doubt they'd even be able to ride in this weather, their wind-burned ears already flushed a bright pink. As Lucas followed Mike's gaze down the street, a black Ford rounded the corner. It took most of them a second to distinguish the features of the LTD Crown Victoria and attach some meaning to the vehicle, but Mike recognized it immediately. He instantly sharpened his gaze, focusing on the windshield as their shrinking proximity capitulated him into a mounting frenzy.

"Guys..." Dustin's voice seized their attention.

"W-What?" Will glanced about, helplessly lost amongst his frozen friends. He could tell something was up with that car...it *meant* something to them. Something bad. It drove ever closer and Mike began to slowly back up, squinting accusingly at the man behind the wheel. "Guys what is it?"

"S-Should we run?!" Dustin asked, his gaze never leaving the approaching car. Lucas was already prepped for a confrontation, his feet shuffling on their own accord. He subconsciously broadened his shoulders like a stentorian, tightening his lips aggressively. Will's brow raised as he noticed his apparently distressed friends trying to collect themselves, trying to decide what to do but only grasping at straws. "Mike?!" Dustin slammed his hand into the Dungeon Master's shoulder, demanding an answer. The car was almost beside them now, decelerating. That driver was already rolling down his window...and their hearts jumped into their throats.

At the last second, Mike turns to face them all and says, "Act normal. Eleven is dead."

"What?" Dustin hissed through a whisper.

"We don't know where she is, got it?" Mike instructed in a low tone. Lucas hesitantly nodded while Dustin blinked those blue eyes against his surging fear. Mike was about to grab onto him and shake his shoulders when Will stepped through the group, addressing the man in the car. Of course Will would be the least afraid, not holding any connection to the vehicles. *He'd been far too busy fending off a monster*

*in an alternate dimension to recognize Brenner's associates.* But Will knew what Mike was inferring, and he understood that this was probably one of the "Bad Men" they'd talked about.

"Hello," Will stepped up to the window, hiding his fear behind a polite smile.

The man in the grey suit had to raise his voice for them to hear it over the wind, "You kids look like you're in a bit of a fix."

Lucas shuffled, turning to eye the bikes as if they'd just appeared there. "No...we're good," Dustin assured him, shrugging off this accurate observation.

That man craned his neck to get a better look at their tires, "...looks like somebody cut your wheels..."

"...w-we can walk," Will stated in the kindest voice he could manage.

"You sure? The weather's only supposed to get worse after this..." his eyebrows flicked upwards in surprise, trying to maintain eye contact with the boy who came back to life. Mike had yet to get a word in edgewise; Will seemed to be the mediator today...which was a good thing, because the Dungeon Master stood fuming with seething resentment for this man. He didn't recognize him at all...*he must've been new.* Despite this, Mike's fists were clenched and his jaw locked tight. An unspeakable amount of fire raged within his chest, and he was undoubtedly certain that if he were to speak to this man... nothing but lava and fury would come spewing out. Mike wanted nothing more than to cut *his* tires and leave him stranded...

...but he pursed his lips, remaining silent as Will nodded confidently, "...yeah. We'll be fine."

"We've been through worse," Dustin chimed in, those blue eyes piercing against those chestnut curls.

"Yeah..." Lucas managed to speak past his adrenaline.

The man in the car shrugged absently, "Your loss." Then, with a haunting smile, he drove off, just as suavely as he'd arrived. They bunched together, watching him go until the bumper of the Crown

Victoria rounded a corner, out of sight.

"That bastard..." Dustin muttered, shaking his head.

As the wind cut at their frames, Mike finally broke his bated silence, "They know."

"No they don't!" Dustin tried to sound positive.

"Come *on* Dustin! Did you *not* see his suit? That car?!" Lucas blurted out as Will coughed into his arm, wrenching over a bit with effort. The wind was merciless, slamming into him face-first. It was that kind of blistery gust that steals your breath while simultaneously offering endless amounts of crisp, clean oxygen, and Will struggled against it, grimacing into his sleeve. "They *know* she's alive! They're obviously trying to scare us!" Lucas exclaimed as Dustin shook his head, knowing that to be the truth.

"They're trying to tell us something..." Mike surmised.

"Seems more like a warning to me..." Lucas added, creasing his brow at Mike.

"Guys...when Hopper came by to get Eleven last night..." Mike trailed off with an exasperated sigh, his brow furrowed as some horrifying realization reared its ugly head. It threatened to choke him along with each blast of air.

"What?" Lucas pressed, eyeing him expectantly. Dustin turned to Will, rapidly becoming aware of his difficulty and patting him on the back.

"...he didn't *need* to come and get her. Will's mom even said she could stay with us...but he took her anyway."

"Mike, what are you getting at?" Dustin watched him incredulously.

"When he came to bring El to Will's house he looked *tired*. Really stressed out about something..." Mike went on, eyeing the ground furiously.

Lucas creased his brow as Dustin kept his hand firm on Will's back, the boy finally regaining his breath and straightening back up. Dustin

watched Mike carefully, and from the brim of his hat suggested, "...Lando..."

"No way!" Will choked out, swallowing dryly. He understood most of Dustin's references (plus he'd seen *The Empire Strikes Back* at least four or five times). He couldn't fathom Hop – the one who'd **personally** saved him from the icy clutches of death – betraying their trust so easily. "...he wouldn't sell us out! He's not like that."

"Maybe not..." Mike recounted his words. "...but there was something off about him last night. He didn't look okay...if you guys had seen him you would've thought so too..."

"We need to go..." Dustin sighed, righting his bike on its useless wheels and waiting for them to follow. None of them did, swept up with this ludicrous assumption.

"Dustin, what about the Bad Men?" Mike exclaimed, glaring at him accusingly. "What about Eleven?!"

"You guys can stand here and debate this as much as you want, but there's only *one* way we're gonna find out," he said. Lucas stood his bike up beside Dustin's, his expression stern and deep with buried concern. "Now does anyone else wanna get to the bottom of this?" Wordlessly, Mike and Will eyed each other, then rushed off to follow the other two boys. They rolled their bikes as gingerly as they could against the sidewalks, being careful not to bend the tire-frames. Mike's thoughts were alight with worry, deepening into a frightening theory that put all of them in danger. Surely Hopper wouldn't do that to them, not to Eleven...

...right?

Lucas broke another long silence, "...you think *they* sabotaged our bikes?"

"I wouldn't put it past them..." Dustin commented, bitterness coloring his words.

"How would they even know we were at the laundromat?" Will cut in, eyeing them all and walking on Mike's left. They sighed at this,

unable to conceive a plausible theory. Even if Hopper *had* betrayed them, he didn't know about the stained clothes *or* that they'd gone this far to clean them. Mike furrowed his brow. *It was only us and Nancy there...*Nancy.

"...Nancy's the *only* other person who knows about the laundromat," Mike stated.

"I wouldn't put it past her either..." Lucas added in a snarky tone.

"...hey!" Mike turned to glare daggers at his friend as Will and Dustin exchanged jovial grins.

"I'm *kidding*," he assured Mike with a stressed word. "Nancy wouldn't do that...she actually *likes* the Weirdo..." Mike rolled his eyes at this, ignoring his teasing friend and trying to focus on his swarming thoughts.

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: Thank you all so much for reading! I deeply value all the feedback I've gotten. It really does mean a lot. Anyone else who writes on here will understand. Sorry for the long wait. Life got in the way...as per the usual. Hope you're enjoying the story so far! Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*

## 30. Blooming Curiosity

### Chapter Thirty – Blooming Curiosity

As the boys trudged on towards Maple Street, lugging their bikes beside them, Jonathan Byers was pulling into the Wheelers' driveway, his anxiety clinging to him in a heavy coat of perspiration. *Relax*, he ordered himself. He needed his shower to last him all day. As he exited the car, the intolerant wind immediately ruffled his hair, almost cruelly. *Great...* now it hung from his scalp in a frizzy, tangled mess. He stopped, eyed his car, contemplated bailing on Nancy altogether, then stomped up to the front porch, concert tickets in hand. Nervously, he knocked on the door with a clenched fist, shaking his head and trying to swallow down that ever-present anxiety.

In seconds, Nancy was standing before him, smiling politely. She was wearing a long-sleeve top with black and white stripes, perfectly geometrical. *Thank God she was wearing jeans*, he thought to himself. He'd already seen the wind do horrible things to women's skirts *on his way here*, and he didn't want Nancy to have to suffer through that. The girl stole a moment to eye his hair...frazzled to almost endearing lengths. The way his cheeks flushed red with each chilling gust made him all the more...*attractive*. Whoa...*Jonathan Byers is a friend... you're **not** attracted to him*. He eyed her bashfully, pursing his lips and finally asking, "You ready to go?"

"Yeah! Let me just tell my mom," she nodded, tearing herself from the threshold and rushing into the kitchen. Karen wasn't there, so after taking a moment to furrow her brow, she went to the basement stairs. Karen was halfway up, her done-up face cracking with concern, "...hey Mom?"

"Nancy!" she exclaimed, reaching the top of the staircase. "Where are the boys?"

*Oh crap*. Nancy's eyes widened as she fought to swallow the truth, trying to concoct the smoothest of lies. "They...went to Will's fort."

Karen eyed her alarmingly, "You *let* them go?!" Her voice was one of

deafening in-credulousness and Nancy was taken aback.

"...I thought it would be fine!" Nancy shrugged, much to Karen's disbelief.

"Nancy, I wanted them all to stay *here*! After what happened yesterday..." Karen clasped her forehead into an open palm, shaking her head slightly and lowering her voice. "This town just...doesn't feel as safe anymore. I want Mike to stay inside for a while...just until things calm down."

For the first time this morning, Nancy eyed her thoughtfully. Now, Karen was a *very* guarded parent, insisting on curfews and bedtimes and no talking on the phone past ten. Luckily, Mike was her "golden child" – or so Nancy thought – and he usually managed to get away with murder every now and then. So he'd grown accustomed to skirting the rules. *Who was she to talk? She'd snuck Jonathan Byers into her room last night **and** walked him out!* Everything came rushing back to Nancy in alarmingly accurate detail: the blood on their bathroom floor; Eleven's face, crinkled up in agony; those horrendous cuts and the terrifying tale they shared concerning how they'd come to be on the girl's back. Not to mention the slugs Will had mentioned! Their description of the Upside Down had been vaguely familiar...the boys tried explaining it last year to her and the Byers. Sadly, none of them truly understood what these dimensions were...it was all speculation; intricately simple theories spun together into unruly tangles.

It suddenly made perfect sense for Karen to be worried...*especially* after yesterday's shooting. "...I-I didn't know..." Nancy stammered, brow pitching upwards.

"Where's the girl? Is she *with* them?" Karen demanded.

"She's at Jonathan's house...with Joyce," Nancy calmed her with this misperception, oblivious to the mitigation it brought on Karen's psyche.

The mother sighed, "Good...good." Karen could see the beginnings of a question forming on her daughter's lips. "...you have that concert to go to, right?"



Nancy blinked, "...yeah. Jonathan's outside with his car..." She trailed off, understanding if her mother didn't want her to go anymore and completely ready to accept that. If she said no, Nancy could always just invite Jonathan inside to talk about everything...although, *everything* was a horribly pressing topic. Picking it apart, with or without friends never really got Nancy's hopes up...it usually ended with her fighting herself over some indecision or past-mistake.

Her mother pursed her lips, deepening her gaze instinctively. "Just... be *careful* Nancy..."

The girl chuckled knowingly, her words drenched in surprise. "I will..." Her mother nodded a silent, fretful confirmation as Nancy walked towards the door.

"...have fun!" she called with a wave of her hand.

"Thanks!" Nancy called back just before shutting the door. She caught Jonathan furiously trying to fix his hair, and he shoved his hands into his pockets.

"Ready?" he asked a little numbly. He could see something wrong beneath those baby blue eyes. It was guilt...he knew that look. Nancy was getting so good at lying to her parents it started to scare her. At least this excursion would be exactly what she'd planned, matching up with her parents' expectations perfectly.

"Yeah!" she nodded, smiling broadly at him.

"Cool," he smiled back, walking her to his greenish-grey Ford. It was a twelve-year-old piece of junk, a hand-me-down of sorts...but Jonathan was grateful to even be driving a car of any caliber. *Hopefully she won't mind*, he thought foolishly, planting himself in the driver's seat. Both teenagers had millions of things to say to the other, and not enough time to say them.

Nancy began with, "So...how's Eleven?" She asked it with a smile, turning to Jonathan confidently, "How's she getting along with Huxley?"

"...I-I don't know..." he shook his head and shrugged his shoulders

simply. "Hop hasn't come back yet..." Nancy's heart leapt into her throat as she eyed him confusingly.

"...what?" Jonathan returned a shocked stare. "What do you mean he hasn't come back yet?" Nancy demanded.

This spiked Jonathan's anxiety and that sheen of sweat threatened to return. "H-He hasn't come back yet. They're probably still at the hospital..."

Nancy eyed the dashboard fearfully, her lips parting in misplaced realization, "...you guys found the cuts...didn't you?"

Now it was Jonathan's turn to be surprised, and he spun to watch her closely, "Wait...what?" They stared each other down, eyes burning with questions. "What cuts?" Another moment of silence passed as they blinked, failing to ignore this deep-rooted misperception.

After a moment of silence, Nancy shifted in her seat so she was facing him as Jonathan switched off the ignition, copying her action. "When Hopper came to get her, he said he was taking her back to your place..."

"...yeah, *after* the blood transfusion," Jonathan nodded comprehensively, hoping she could catch on. Neither of them knew how deep of a hole Hop had dug for himself, or that Eleven now lay at the bottom of it.

Nancy's mouth fell open in shock, "*What?!*" Their stomachs simultaneously lurched, clogging with an ominous, unsettling fear.

"...he didn't tell you..." he stated more than asked, peering out into the neighborhood reservedly.

"NO!" Nancy confirmed as Jonathan blinked, gazing out into the windy streets. The girl's heart was thumping in a crazed fashion, and she felt like falling into hysterics. "...w-what else is he not telling us?"

Jonathan turned back to her, actual concern plastered across his face, ruminating in his soft, brown eyes. "...I-I don't know..." he stammered. The reality of everything began to hit him and Jonathan suddenly shook his head, unlocking his doors. "...maybe we shouldn't

go to the concert..."

"Jonathan," Nancy began, grabbing his attention. His gaze hinted at everything he was silencing himself about. "There's something you're not, telling me..."

"No, I told you everything I know," he shook his head. Nancy simply fixed her gaze, furrowing her brow slightly and at that, Jonathan sighed. *She knew...HOW could she tell?!* "I'll tell you later...when we actually *know* what's going on..." He reached down to switch on the ignition, the car growling to life as the tailpipe coughed up smoke. "...we need to make sure she's okay..." he insisted. Nancy saw how perturbed he was, a deep-seated concern planting in his core and she felt a horrible pain in her chest. She couldn't stand to see him like this without knowing the source of it all.

"Jonathan, I'm *not* gonna judge you..." she began. For some odd reason, the possibility of *him* working in cahoots with the Bad Men presented itself, though Nancy's better judgment shot this presumption down rather quickly. It simply wasn't in his moral caliber to be so malicious and dodgy. "You can tell me...maybe you'll feel, better..." she suggested, eyeing him compassionately.

He shook his head, biting his lip and staring into the worn-out design printed upon his steering wheel. "My Dad..." he paused, breathing deeply. Nancy's brow raised, expecting to listen in on some painfully accurate story depicting how much of an ass Lonnie apparently was. Nancy was prepared for this, even readying herself for Jonathan's tears...but instead, his words threw a curve-ball straight to Nancy's mind, obliterating every pattern she'd built up into tiny pieces. "...he died yesterday..."

There was nothing Nancy could say, nothing she was prepared to do. Jonathan locked eyes with her, and she was horrified to find that he WASN'T CRYING. *If he was, she'd at least know where to start, maybe even what to say!* No, his eyes were dry as he delivered this earth-shattering news. Nancy finally managed to ask in a mousy-voice, "...h-how?" If this was anyone besides Jonathan, and she was anyone besides Nancy, this would've been the **wrong** thing to ask.

Unsurprisingly enough, this was when Jonathan began to crack. His

jaw tightened as they shared that special silence only they were so good at sharing. It wasn't like the fermatas Steve and her waited through...no, these were precious, comfortable silences. Whenever Steve and her spent long moments without speaking, it'd sent them both to the edge of their seats, anxiously awaiting the other to finally talk and eventually buckling under the pressure and just spewing out anything themselves, just to kick off another conversation. No... Nancy felt good in these moments of silence. It was something reserved, just for them. *Foolishly, she wondered if Jonathan felt the same...*he eventually spoke, "...he was...in the wrong place at the wrong time..." Reading her questioning expression, he reluctantly continued, though this process was akin to pulling teeth or realigning fractures. "Hop must've called Eleven, because when I got back home, she told me Will was in the hospital..." Jonathan's face was folding up, and he looked like the guilt was slowly but surely suffocating him. "...so of course I rushed out of there...and then Lonnie showed up..."

Nancy raised her brow at this, finishing the puzzle all on her own, "...don't tell me..." Jonathan turned to stare at her, and Nancy sharpened her gaze. "...is *he* the one who...gave her the bruise?"

Jonathan nodded, shaking his head in disgust at the man he called Father. "But...you know El..." he managed to say with a playful nod of his head. Somehow, grins found themselves on both teenagers faces, both of them irreverently relieved they could say they *knew* this unique, brilliant child. It was something sacred to them...and neither person was ready to lose that hallowed connection just yet. "...she must've gotten away...to go to your house," he watched her nod understandably, easily following the harrowing tale. Nancy was now on the edge of her seat, trying her hardest to save the burning questions for later, until after he finished this story. "...so then Hopper comes back to check on her and she's gone. He locks Lonnie up at the police station and..." Jonathan tightens his jaw, much to Nancy's distress. "...Brenner's men took him and...*killed* him."

This sent unprecedented chills down Nancy's spine at the drop of a hat. Of all the ways Lonnie Byers could've died...it had to be at the hands of someone meaner and crueller than he could ever wish to be. "I'm so sorry..." Nancy finally spoke, shaking her head. "That's

sounds...scary."

"I know..." he nodded, glancing at her sideways. Those blue irises pled with him, begged for some twinge of emotion to come leaking from those gentle brown orbs. "You don't have to be sorry..." Jonathan lowered his gaze, going on to say what a more reserved part of him would come to regret. "...at least Will doesn't have to be disappointed anymore."

"Jonathan..." she hung on his name with a shake of her head, hoping to verbalize her empathy for him. Nancy thought perhaps *that* was going a bit far, but it wasn't. Jonathan was going over the dozens of times Lonnie had ditched his little brother, beginning a pathway of broken promises and misguided dreams. Lonnie wanted Will to like baseball, so Will had tried his very best to tag along. Then, whenever it came time to do something Will *truly* adored, his father was nowhere to be found. Jonathan considered it Lonnie's loss though, swooping in to take the boy under his wing and being ever so glad he did. Even if Will weren't his brother, Jonathan figured they would've gotten along quite well. Both boys respected each other's differences, and they now shared an unbreakable bond, the likes of which Mike and Nancy had yet to achieve.

"It's fine..." the teenager shrugged. "I'm not even upset...I'm only sad that...I *can't* feel sorry for him." Without warning, Nancy reached across the open space and wrapped him in a hug, her head resting comfortably within the crook of his shoulder. They were in a car, so the angle was a bit awkward, but in that moment, Jonathan wouldn't have it any other way. She smelt like strawberries and clean linen, and Nancy found that he smells like showers, a touch of lingering cigarette smoke hinting along his jacket. He blinked, unsure of how to respond beside holding her closer, softly gazing at the bending trees outside. The sound of the wind cutting away at his car snapped them back to reality, and Nancy painfully pulled away, staring straight into those soft, earthy eyes.

"I'm *sorry*," she repeated those same sad words. "Even though he was mean to you..."

"I know..." Jonathan finished, his gaze trailing to the radio. "...he didn't deserve to die that way..."

"...no one does..." Nancy spoke, her voice the gentlest it could be. Suddenly going to the concert began to make them both resent themselves for being able to escape this hell so easily. Both of them yearned to stay right where they were until things were worked out and Eleven was found. "...you're right," Nancy sighed, trailing off with him and losing her gaze. "...maybe we shouldn't go to the concert..."

"I just wish Will could've come along..." he stared at the tickets in his hand as he pensively contemplated tearing them in two. "...he doesn't know it, but...he would've *loved* listening to them." Nancy smiled at how thoughtful Jonathan was, but then her gaze followed his, right to the tickets in hand. With a frown, she recognized the way his fingers poised around the tiny slips.

"Wait!" she reached out, grasping his hands in one of hers. "...you should take Will."

"What?"

Nancy chuckled, "Take *Will*. Take *him* to the concert. Think about how much those tickets cost! You can't waste them!" Jonathan blinked in surprise at her. She wasn't exactly raised with a silver spoon - like Steve was - but she still had a twenty-two inch television *and* a working piano. He hadn't really considered how frugal Nancy could be when it came down to it. She was right. He'd saved up nearly half his earnings just to treat Will, and now he was out of a job, looking for another. "He'll love it! And...you guys can wait until after to break the news to him..." Jonathan stared off down the street, seemingly considering this option. Then he looked back towards Nancy, and he could tell she was serious. "It'll be easier for him..."

"...a-are you sure?" Jonathan checked, eyeing her remorsefully. *Asking Nancy to go had been Will's idea in the first place!* He hadn't expected this being the way things would turn out – though he'd had his plaguing doubts – and he gingerly came to realize that he wasn't the kind of person to bail on anyone. If anything...*he* was the one getting left behind. Still, this didn't seem to be what Nancy was doing.

"Positive. You said Will **loves** *The Clash*..." she explained. "...he'll probably enjoy it more than I will," Nancy finally announced, grimacing apologetically. "Sorry..."

"No, no I get it. It's fine," he chuckled, understanding her perfectly. Concerts were loud; Nancy was not...at least he didn't think she was. "...maybe we can go, another time?"

"Definitely," she nodded, suddenly feeling guilty for deserting Jonathan. "I just...don't think we should be running away from all of this."

After a moment of intense staring, Jonathan nodded, "You're right." They shared another peaceful silence until he turned back to her, "...you said something about...cuts?" He watched Nancy grit her teeth behind her lips, that jaw line tensing up considerably. They weren't going to the concert, but they'd spend another five minutes discussing everything the other had missed: Eleven's injuries; Will's sickness; the reveal to Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler; and Hop's altered state. Together, they went over everything they knew and discerned who didn't know what. Neither of them felt comfortable trusting Hop...despite how much care he was actually putting into keeping Eleven safe.

The next time she woke, there were voices talking; a woman saying words she only half understood...and in an *obnoxiously* rehearsed manner. Eleven's eyes shot open and she gasped, peering about the familiar room until she found the television screen. Realizing that this box of light was the source of the noise, she relaxed, checking the rest of the place like an intruder. A smell tickled her nostrils, and her mouth began to water uncontrollably. She turned to that same coffee table – which was now clear of cans and pill bottles – and spotted a sandwich, sitting like a jewel atop a styrofoam plate. Her stomach growled viciously, and fighting past her exhaustion, Eleven managed to sit up, brushing the annoying blankets off with a slow move of her hand. The instant her fingers grasped those two slices of wheat, she allotted as much energy she could into *devouring* the ham and cheese sandwich, chewing it hungrily and only pausing a few seconds to savor it. That creaminess returned to her and she recognized the faint hint of mayonnaise, only coming up for air when necessary. A glass of pristine-looking water sat beside the plate, and once she'd put the sandwich away, she grabbed it and gulped it

down. Then, she took a moment to focus on the television, glaring at the woman tiredly. Her voice was *droning*, clawing insufferably at Eleven's patience; so she eyed the tiny button on the front panel, focusing intently. With a blink, the broadcast fizzled out and the lightbox went dark. Mentally patting herself on the back for her precision, Eleven turned back to the empty plate, as if there would be more food. A spot of blood plunged through the air, splattering into the open span of the table. Eleven blinked with shock, raising a hand to her nose in disbelief. *That's not good.* On a good day, El can manage tiny miracles like that *at least* three or four times before the dizziness consumes her and her nostrils flow with blood. This obviously wasn't going to be one of her best days, and she mentally braced herself.

The sound of rushing water faded into earshot, and by the way it splashed loudly against some kind of solid, smooth surface...she could tell it was a shower. She couldn't remember the last time she'd taken one...and suddenly, Eleven was horrified to learn that she doesn't know what day it is. Time was something Eleven had yet to fully comprehend – along with the English language – so she gauged herself using sunrises and sunsets...or significant moments. It had been even harder for her in the facility...Papa sometimes having to explain to her what goodnight and good morning meant. They always came before and after her two meals, she knew that much. Having to explain these commonplace terms pestered him endlessly, and she hated being a nuisance...but her curiosity hungered to know. Otherwise, his greetings and goodbyes would mean nothing to her... and in a way, they never should have. There were no rising suns and full moons in Hawkins Lab...only bathtubs and smooth, white walls...

...and Leo. There was Leo too...

*How long had it been since she saw Mike?* Currently, her freshest memory was of Hopper, and she strained her ears to focus in on the shower noises. That urge to leave resurfaced, along with something else...something welling from deep inside her. She gasped, clutching at the sofa and preparing to be sucked back into the Upside Down or have some monster burst free of her stomach, or both. The water stopped and El looked up, face wrought with concern.

With a groan, Hop dried his hair, changing back into jeans and a blue



flannel. He felt like he had shed some kind of outer skin just then, washing it away in the rushing current, because truthfully he hadn't expected to last this long. Hop gazed into the mirror, sighing deeply to himself. That humid steam deeply irritated him, fogging up the glass and acting as a constant reminder of how estranged he grown from his former self. Wiping a spot clear on the glass, he peered at a man he hardly recognized...blue eyes hanging deep and hollow, like broken lightbulbs. The lies didn't hinder him in the least; there were plenty of things they had kept from him as well. Determined as he was, Hop was going to get to the bottom of it...he *had* to. Pursing his lips, he took a sip of his beer and headed towards the short hall.

Walking into the main room, he saw her sitting up, an immediate sense of relief washing over him. That feeling was quickly replaced with fear as he sharply focused on her face, those hazel eyes huge with some kind of unspeakable terror. "Hey," he stepped closer and she whimpered, pulling her knees up to her chest and trying to bury this horrible feeling. "...you okay?" he asked a little awkwardly. El frowned at him from her crossed arms, mouth clenched shut as she shook her head disagreeably. The second he eyed the empty plate and glass, she made a guttural noise, trying to swallow something back down and clinging to her knees ever more desperately. "...oh shit..." he muttered, reaching out and lifting her into his arms. She whimpered fearfully but didn't try to fight him, petrified with this aching sensation reverberating through her stomach.

Carefully, he carried her into the bathroom, setting her on the ground before the toilet and lifting the seat. Her knees folded delicately beneath her but she was *clutching* his shirt like a lifeline, worried this was like one of Will's episodes. Eleven whimpered with fear, eyeing him urgently. A part of her remembered that type of flannel, just in a sadder color; how she wore it in the forest...and how much warmth it'd brought her. "Let it out..." he urged in a calm tenor, smoothing a hand against her thin shoulder blades. She shook her head, grimacing at the awful rumbling in her core. Hop sighed, inadvertently rolling his eyes before saying, "You *have* to." Before El can rebuke again, she clutched the toilet bowl and *hurled* into the water, crying and sobbing as she did.

Eleven's sinuses were a burning conglomeration of bile and unctuous

mucus. She had **no idea** what was happening or if this was normal... but something told her this might be what Mike had talked about. They both spotted chunks of that sandwich floating in the water as the bile stung her eyes and nose. The more she cried the more she vomited, and Hop was barely holding it together, covering his mouth with a hand and keeping the other on her back in a gentle reassurance. "You're fine..." he exhaled, trying hard not to look at the vomit. "You're okay..." his sigh was deep and patient as she coughed into the porcelain, white-knuckling its edges and humming with terror. After three more violent fits of puking, her stomach was empty. He reached over to flush all of it down, glancing quickly at it and checking for blood. There wasn't any...just undigested morsels that made *him* want to puke, swishing down the drain. He visibly shuddered as Eleven tried regaining her bearings, shuffling groggily to the side, her eyes barely open. Those brown, bloodshot orbs were questioning, too exhausted to voice her distress. Her head was pounding with some kind of monstrous rhythm. "You feel any better?" he asked, breaking that ever-thickening silence. The girl blinked nervously, shaking her head. *Was she SUPPOSED to feel better?* "...okay..." he nodded understandably, gently coaxing her to her feet and half-lifting, half-dragging her to the sink.

Hopper understood (definitely more than *she* did) as he turned on a faucet and snatched a washcloth from a cupboard, warming it beneath the shooting water. Wordlessly, he brought it to her mouth, wiping it clean. El would normally wrench away from a gesture like this, but she was too tired, giving into trusting Hopper with this tiny action alone. He set the cloth into her hands and hastily searched about for a spare toothbrush. "Shit..." he muttered to himself, unable to find more than his yellow one. "I'm gonna get you something...stay right here," he instructed, ensuring her grip on the sink with his hands. When he left her side, those thin arms strained against the surface, her fatigue swatting her mercilessly, bearing most of her weight onto the sink itself. Wrenching that cup from the coffee table, he poured another glass and rushed back to her, having her sip from the water. "Okay...swish it around and spit it out," he said, pointing to the bowl. She tried following his instructions, hacking into the drain and nearly choking on the liquid. His hands rushed to her shoulders so suddenly, fretful and guarding, that it surprised Eleven. "Easy...easy..." Hop consoled the small girl. She gasped, fighting for

breath and dropping the glass, flinching when it shattered against the floor near their bare feet. Horribly confused over what had just happened, she sobbed miserably, knowing for sure that something was very wrong with her. Quite frankly, she wasn't aware the human body was even capable of such regurgitation until today! She knew birds could after watching them in the forest, but *she* wasn't a **bird**, no matter *how* much she sometimes wished she could be!

He could see she was beyond consolation, and his sigh came heavy and deep, "...okay...hey. Hey, can you walk? Do you think you can walk?" The girl hadn't uttered a word all morning, and it was starting to scare Hop. There was no communication; not even the tiniest of verbal exchanges despite how many questions he'd asked her. Sure, El was normally a quiet person...but Hop was still perturbed by it all. When she cautiously nodded, blinking tiredly, he mimicked her action, "Okay." He took a moment to glance down at her feet, "...just a second." His hands wrapped beneath her armpits and he hefted her onto the vanity, crouching low to sweep the glass to the side with a towel. Eleven eyed him tiredly, sulking against the mirror, her lips refusing to part, to murmur anything amidst all of her piercing curiosities. When Hop peered back up, those eyes looked wounded, that stare slicing right into his heart like butter. He sighed, lowering his gaze and shaking his head. Reluctantly, he turned the faucet, cutting off the sound of the rushing water. "Alright..." he gripped her arms, lowering her back onto the now clear floor. She looked out of the doorway a little hesitantly, gingerly stepping into the corridor.

Hop followed her, remaining within arm's reach in case she suddenly collapsed (he didn't want to explain any *other* marks to Joyce beside the cuts). El was doing good, but the instant she stood beside the couch she practically dropped onto it, sinking into the cushions and letting her legs dangle over the edge. Hop reached over to put some blankets on her and she whimpered, eyeing him fearfully; it was enough to get him to freeze up and think about why she was suddenly so anxious. "...no blankets?" Hop asked with an incredulous shake of his head. She copied his movement in confirmation, maintaining a suddenly fierce glare. *She'll need them later.* There was no heat in Hopper's trailer...just a fireplace. With a sigh, he bundled them beside her, trying to avoid eye contact when it was all she gave him. He couldn't look at her...his guilt so acute it prickled like

cyanide in his blood. "I'll be back," he announced emptily, walking across the tiny space to the phone. El noticed how it was lying in a broken heap of parts and cords as Hopper reached out for it, his hand freezing mid-motion. She watched him grit his teeth and shake his head, suddenly shoving the phone to the side, eliciting a sharp ring. El jumped, eyeing him as he stomped past the couch and to the kitchen. He hastily poured her another glass of water and set it before her on the table, reaching out to grasp a random cup and place it beside the other. "Swish your mouth, spit it into that cup," he directed, sighing and suddenly leaving through the back to smoke. A crisp afternoon wind blew in through the open door causing Eleven to shiver, and – pursing her lips resignedly– she reached over to grab one of the blankets from the pile, wrapping it around her disdainfully. She cleaned her mouth the best she could, spitting the nastiness into the empty cup and groaning. *Had she really just lost all that food?* Eleven shuddered, hoping it didn't keep happening, knowing she couldn't afford such setbacks.

Fighting hard to steady herself, Eleven peered about the room, taking in the scenery of Hopper's tiny home. It was incredibly small compared to Joyce and Mike's, everything laying within a short distance of one another. That red living chair stood out against his tiled fireplace, and Eleven had no idea how she hadn't noticed him there before, snoring quietly. As she gazed about, her eyes settled on a picture hanging by the back door, quite close to her side of the couch. With much difficulty, she reached out and grabbed it off the wall, studying it closely. What appeared to be a red house with a blue roof stood out against the white paper, taller than the tree beside it; Eleven mainly focused on the three people in the drawing, two adults and a very tiny kid with golden locks. A giant, monster of a sun hung a glaring yellow in the top right corner, demanding her attention, but El went back to the family and smiled, blinking thoughtfully to herself in a daze. Just as a brilliant idea worked its way into her brain, Hopper returned, stopping just within the threshold to glare at the picture possessively.

The slamming door was her only warning before he *ripped* it from her fingers. "That's not yours," he mumbled in a low tone, walking off towards his room to hide the parchment. El watched him go, sadness working its way onto her face as she slowly eyed the floor. Hopper

returned within moments, eyeing her sternly, and he was shocked to find that she didn't return his glare. Another pang of guilt swiped his chest and he sighed, sitting beside her on the couch. Almost comically, she rose up with the added weight, her eyes widening on cue and shooting to him alarmingly. "Listen..." he began, his expression tired yet searching. "...you *have* to tell me how you got those cuts," he insisted. Eleven only blinked, peering off to the side in silent grief. "Joyce and I *need* to know..." he pressed, focusing his gaze despite her feigned distraction. Eleven finally turned to him, looking as if she was going to speak, but shook her head in an uncompromising manner. Hopper sighed, realizing she was giving him the silent treatment. He probably deserved it. *She did just lose her lunch...* he thought. Sighing, he eyed the plate meagerly, closing his eyes at the gentle sunlight.

Just when he was about to suggest a lighter meal, someone began pounding against his door. They both jumped, their expressions turning dire in mere seconds. Hop turned back to her, "Here, come on..." His arms reached out and with nowhere else to turn, she grabbed onto his shoulders as he carried her into his room. Gently placing her behind the far side of his bed - so that she was hidden behind the height of the mattress - he rushed to the door. "Wait here," he demanded. Eleven watched him confusedly, her eyes simultaneously posing a million questions and begging him to stay. Hop sighed, lowering his voice, "...if they come in here, hide under the bed." The mere fact that Hopper said "they" made El want to run, and with a moment's hesitation, she hastily nodded, though her face folded up in fear.

"Don't..." she shook her head, that first word climbing up out of her throat, heartbreakingly soft and pleading. The knocking persisted, growing louder and louder, but Hopper had already left the room, her voice too quiet for him to hear. Running out of options, El eyed the window, squinting against that blazing light and swallowing nervously. Despite how it poured over her skin, melting through the billowing white curtains, she shivered with cold, feeble beneath its heavenly rays.

Hop picked his way across the room and retrieved his gun from the kitchen counter, creasing his brow and facing the door. With his

weapon cocked and at the ready, Hopper started towards that haunting slab of wood, rolling his feet with each silent step. For a heart-stopping moment, the trailer went quiet, and he could faintly hear Eleven shuffling about in his room. It was the only sound, and once *she* realized this, she instinctively froze. Both of them quaked at another onslaught of knocks and Hopper impatiently tore the door open, just wide enough so he could peek out. *If they were going to kill him, they'd have busted down the door by now.* A woman was perched on his railing, seated there like the air blew sweet and the sun rose just for her. With a flutter, she plopped onto his porch as he stood, blinking and speechless. "Jimmy!" she cooed, smiling broadly at him.

"S-Sandra...?" he muttered, his eyes wide with alarm. El could barely hear that throaty voice from her spot behind the bed as she slowly eyed the hall, peering over the mattress and frowning in confusion. *Jimmy?! Joyce said his name was Hopper!* El blinked, peering into the panes of wood composing the corridor and wondering if it was all a lie.

*Oh dear God...* Hopper sighs unabashedly. *Only one person called him that.* The woman noticed his fatigue, frowning slightly. "Sheesh, you look strung out to dry..." she noted, her eyes trailing him up and down.

Hop's mind swam with confusion, "...Sandra what are you *doing* here?"

"What?! I can't say hello to my old *buddy*...?" she asked, sauntering up to him in a playful gesture. "Were you honestly expecting anybody?"

He blinked against the sunshine, his gaze distant and *very* distracted...the opposite of what she wanted. "No...wasn't expecting anyone. That's why I'm a little surprised..." he stated, finally catching her gaze with his wild, blue eyes.

Sandra frowned, "...something the matter with me coming around? You used to *love* surprises like this..." Her ever-so-subtle nuance perturbed him even further, *knowing* he didn't have the time – much less, the blissful ignorance – to mess around the way she was proposing. "Can I come in?"

"Now's not a good time," he insisted, locking eyes with her and nervously gripping the door, his fingernails edging into the timbers a tad painfully.

"Come on Jim...I know it's been awhile since we've seen each other..." she began, sliding her way through the open door, inviting herself in quite unassumingly. The woman stopped in her tracks as soon as she took in the room, her brow pinching at the top with questions.

With a sigh, he released his vice-grip on the door, discreetly pushing his pistol into one of his jean pockets. "Like I said...now is a *bad* time."

"...you smashed your phone..." she said, as if *that* was a horrendous thing to do and quite the cause for alarm. He'd also dismantled his kitchen searching for another one of those damn bugs, but apparently to her the phone took priority; his toaster lay in ruins, and he was currently housing someone who appreciated an eggo or two. Buzzkill. Hop rolled his eyes at this statement, refocusing his gaze just in time for her to turn around and eye him. Now Sandra began studying him like she never had before, her eyes deep and searching. "Are you... alright, Jimmy?" she asked, her voice reaching Eleven clearly. It was entirely unrecognizable, this factor frightening the girl even more.

Hop chuckled to himself, "Yeah! Yeah I'm in the middle of renovating...you know what they say. Out with the old in with the new, right?"

Sandra stepped closer to him, her grin wide and husky, "What else changed while I was gone?" Their faces were quite close, and she detected that hint of tired dullness in his eyes. An unruly, childish part of him spurred Hop on while his wiser half urged against such foolishness.

As evenly as he could possibly manage, "...a lot has changed since last year." A stress highlighted those last two words, not out of spite, but out of sympathy. Her frown was unavoidable, and he blinked, determinedly unmoved, "...sorry." Eleven strained her ears to listen, peering out into the hall with questioning eyes. A long hiatus ensued, one Eleven hardly understood.

Sandra tried him a second time with that smile, whispering, "...have *you* changed?" El yearned so badly to hear what they were saying, wanting to creep to the edge of the room and poke her head out but not having the strength for it.

It was a loaded question, but he knew his answer wouldn't really matter all that much to her anyway. This wasn't Joyce he was talking to...this was a desperate fling from the past, reopening an unwanted invitation to restart that cycle they'd been through at least three times. *If she'd wanted to stay in touch, she would've called before all of this; how could she expect his heart to be so elastic?* Hop decided to be honest for the first time in a few days, "Yes." Her eyes met the floor, lowering to his bare feet. His hair was still damp from the shower, dripping down his neck in rivulets. "Sandra I really need you to leave..." Hop pressed in a reluctant tone.

Her gaze locked back with his, almost determined to prove him wrong somehow. "Jimmy..."

"Please leave," he asked again, his voice a monotone bass.

Sandra attempted to cozy up to him in vain, "But baby, *I miss you...*"

Indifferently, he shrugged his shoulders and uttered the words, "I've moved on." This took her aback, and she stared blankly at him. Before anger even found her, he suggested something in a very serious voice, "...you should too."

Sandra was dumbfounded, unsure of whether she liked this new version of Hop, comparing him to a stick in the mud. "...why would I want to move on?" *As if she hadn't already; as if she wasn't playing him along with ten other guys.*

"Because you don't wanna know me right now..." was all Hop could say. "...trust me. You don't." If Sandra hadn't known him better, she may have taken this as some kind of veiled threat. She at least knew him well enough to discern that this wasn't the case...it was a warning...an almost friendly one. Like a goodbye or a farewell...it made Sandra nervous. Without saying anything, Hopper reached for the door and held it open, "Take care of yourself Sandy..."



"...I actually...forgot something," she began, pursing her lips painfully tight. "...in your room," she pointed.

"I'll get it," he quickly said, starting towards the hall. His heartbeat sped up, hearing those heeled footsteps behind him, *following* him into the bedroom. The instant he was in the doorway, he shot the small girl a *fierce* look and her eyes shot wider, ducking behind the bed and painfully scooching herself beneath it. "Where is it?" he asked. Eleven watched their feet, her hands pressed against the bottom of his mattress. She blinked in awe at her shoes, wondering how she even walked in them at all! They were red and black, and her toes looked painfully squished near the bottom, her ankle bending at an impossible angle. El squinted at this abnormality, thinking to herself...*people were strange*.

Sandra stole a moment to glance fondly at his bed, the burgundy comforter in the exact same disorder as they'd left it. "...it's a piece of clothing," she trailed off, noticing a drawing slapped onto his bedside table.

Hopper sighed, "...socks, shirts, pants...?"

"Panties," she announced. El's eyes widened as Hopper eyed her incredulously, shaking his head and returning to his hurried search. "...oh *you* know," she chuckled at him, bringing Sarah's picture to her face. "...the ones with the red hearts..." Hop's eyelids fluttered for a moment as he tried forcing himself that far back in his stagnant memory, clouded over with the most striking recent events. Eleven watched those familiar feet stomp about the room, turning her head upwards to glare at Sandra's mind-boggling shoes. Hopper glanced over, realizing she was looking at his picture and staring towards her, pursing his lips angrily. Her next words caught him off-guard, surprisingly thoughtful and interested, "...you never told me you had a daughter." Eleven's ears perked at this, and she peered down at his feet, which are now directly beside hers.

He figured she wouldn't know about Sarah; Sandra was a drifter from the city. She never settled, usually jumping from one town to the next on a dime. Hopper just happened to be in the landing zone when she launched herself into Hawkins, leaving just as quickly as she'd arrived...and leaving Hopper in a tizzy. "Yeah..." he sighed, gently

removing the picture from her fingers.

Sandra mulled this over, beginning to shimmy down on her heels, making to peer under the bed, "Maybe they're under here..."

"NO!" he exclaimed, his voice startlingly booming. El's eyes shot wide, glaring at those heels defensively. When Sandra shot him a confused look, he assumed a gentleman's tone, crouching down and offering, "Let me." His cheek nearly grazed the hardwood as Eleven and he exchange tense glances, that face open with pressing alarm. "...yeah I don't see them," he announced, returning to his feet and eyeing her expectantly.

"Aren't you supposed to be good at finding things?" Sandra teased him, a hand on her hip. Hop scoffed knowingly back at her, and he can't help but wonder if that was the whole reason she came here. "Oh well...those were only my favorite pair..." she practically whined, making Eleven frown in confusion.

"...sorry. Maybe you shouldn't wear your favorite pair to a one-night stand." There was now an impenetrable silence between the two and Eleven clenched her eyes shut, hoping her stomach wouldn't make any weird noises.

Thankfully, one of them spoke, "...don't worry. I won't." There was now a bitterness in her voice, and before Hop could say anything, she was clapping out of his room, out of his trailer. Eleven heard him sigh with exasperation, watching him follow her out. Once they're both gone, Eleven let out a great sigh of relief, dragging herself from beneath the mattress and leaning into the wall for support, sliding to her feet. She had so many questions for Hopper, but she still didn't know if she could trust him. They needed to clear the air about so much, wading through the thickest of fogs – choking and noxious – searching for the truth, unable to distinguish them from the lies. Once Hopper was done entertaining Sandra and she eventually drove off – very discontented with herself – he raced back into his trailer and locked the door. Setting his gun down on the coffee table, he rushed back to find Eleven sitting on the bed, facing the window and gazing out of it dreamily.

"She's gone..." Hopper sighed, padding closer to her and stopping

beside the window. She had a look of sheer awe on her face, and she was clutching something close to herself...a stuffed tiger. With a broadening of her eyes, she noticed Hopper's expression turn fierce with indecision, some kind of memory making this object particularly painful. *No wonder she'd found it under his bed.* Lowering her gaze to stare into its plastic eyes, she dusted him off a bit and politely held the feline out to him, watching Hop sternly. She said nothing, not realizing stuffed animals were designed for children; to her, they could defend anyone's dreams...even Hop's. Eleven figured this was his and that he might need...whatever it was to help him sleep, realizing it was wrong of her to take it in the first place.

"...sorry..." she finally murmured in a soft tone. It was her second word to him this morning, and she held the toy out to him, noticing that he hadn't moved since he'd seen it, those blue eyes growing colder and darker. Eleven slowly brought it back to her lap, arms growing weak, watching him empathetically. There was a barely noticeable glimmer in his eyes and he quickly turned away, glaring out through the window and inhaling sharply. With a hand he shifted some of the silky curtains aside and El naturally peered out again, enraptured with the view.

"...here. Let me show you something," he suddenly offered his hand to her, and after a moment of contemplating whether she should bring the stuffed cat, she took it, never once looking away from Hop's face. The tiger stayed with her as they padded through the trailer, working their way to the backdoor. Each step got progressively easier for her, but she still needed him for a decent amount of support. That weakness simply poured out from her insides, spreading into her legs and arms like a curse, draining her quickly. With a free hand Hopper opened the door, both of them squinting into the blinding sunshiny rays of the early afternoon. Eleven soon found it selfish of her to squint, for laying before her was an enormous, crystal clear, mirror of a lake. He watched, smiling as her eyes widened and her mouth hung agape. "Here," he unfolded two lawn chairs, gesturing for her to take a seat before her fatigue devoured her. El lowered into the chair, gazing out in amazement at how the sky replayed itself on the perfectly still surface of the lake. She could match clouds to each other, look into the water and see birds flying high above and inhale the freshness of her first Spring on the outside. Eleven turned to Hop,

her face opening up like a book, telling him what he already knew but had grown too old to appreciate.

Watching her face, he realized they'd become so jaded with these everyday miracles. *This* was all they saw when they stepped outside now, hanging from the trees in green bunches; vibrant shades on the spectrum reaching longingly into the sky with dusty, tender petals, or flying on tempered wings of white and brown. El had never been able to revel in any breathtaking views besides the stars at night...and that had only ever turned her loneliness bitter. She could remember peering up into that nocturnal sky, her stomach pinched in anger, howling with pain as she tried to stave off that endless hunger. Those things Mike called stars had looked so happy, crowded together, never too far from one another...and Eleven had been all alone in her observations, clutching her knees to her chest and trying not to cry. She blinked out at the shimmering water, watching an odd-looking bird swoop low across that glass surface and light itself down onto its depths, buoyant, paddling those webbed feet to help stay afloat. It had a green, funny-looking face with a skinny neck and light brown feathers. El's eyes shot wider when she realized it wasn't sinking...but *sitting* on the water, as if it were the very chair beneath her. *Birds can swim too?!* She wasn't even sure she could swim yet...and this thing could walk, fly AND (apparently) swim with grace. With a shake of its head, the bird lofted back into the air, and Eleven watched it fly across the water, honking in a comical voice. El nearly laughed, her lips gently curling at the edges.

Nodding and chuckling to himself, Hopper reached into his jeans for his lighter, setting a cigarette ablaze and bringing it to his lips. "Wait until you see the sunset...it's like the sky just, lights the water on fire." Eleven creased her brow at this description, eyeing the flame alarmingly. It looked like he was eating the paper...but the other end was on fire. He seemed to breathe in the smoke it made, but when the hint of it passed El's nostrils, she wanted to cough, blinking in the hesitation of a forming question. He felt he should clarify that there wasn't going to be any fires on the water tonight...but he selfishly left that for her to wonder about, not having the energy to explain his imagery.

El still held that tiger close, frowning at a sudden onset of guilt. After

a long moment of them just sitting, gazing out at the marvelous glass lake and breathing in the fresh air and smoke, she finally had to ask, "...is it yours?"

He snickered knowingly, "No. Nobody *owns* the lake. It belongs to the land..." El pursed her lips, silently peering down to the stuffed creature, then back to him. Hop understood, taking a break from the nicotine to answer, being sure to blow it away from her, "...no. It belonged to my daughter..." El lowered her gaze instinctively, pursing her lips as she went over the creature's dark stripes with her finger. Hop watched this seemingly intimate gesture behind the curling wisps of smoke, tapping the cinders onto the deck absentmindedly, "...but she can't have it anymore."

El peered back up at him, "...why not?"

Hop stared right at her, his gaze intensifying. His sigh was so harsh and deep Eleven thought he may have emptied his lungs, and to her relief, his intake was just as ravenous. Those blue eyes stared into rings of hazel, perpetually stoic and reserved. "...she died."

Eleven's face opened up with shock, her lips parting slightly. Without words, she glanced back down to the animal, ashamedly gripping its polyester. She had an idea...but there were still so many unknowns to her. El had to be sure, "...Hop?" He eyed her, somehow managing to keep a straight face amongst his ever-poignant grief. "...what happens...when we die?" Nancy had mentioned Barb being in "a better place" on the phone, and Eleven had been hopelessly confused. After spending minutes mulling endlessly over that ridiculous assumption Nancy had made, El had eventually given up, resigning herself to the window and settling with the likelihood that they all knew something she didn't concerning death. It was one of those grey areas, something she'd never heard of in the lab, like friends or promises or eggos...but death scared Eleven; Papa had wanted her to kill the white cat, but she could barely hurt it. Instead, she'd *ended* two other people's lives in an angry eruption, fed up with the manipulation and the mind games. Now that she thought back on it all...Papa hadn't seemed to mind in the least.

Hopper pursed his lips thoughtfully, and there was a glistening wetness in his eyes she could no longer ignore. El grimaced with

sadness, clutching the tiger ever closer to her stomach, preparing herself for some gruesome description or earth-shattering truth. Or just a backhanded remark, half-expecting to be left alone again. But then he breathed deep, inhaling that lingering air to speak. "...I don't really know..." he finally confessed.

El blinked, a tiny dimple marring her brow. The admirable part about their connection was that she could not for the *life* of her sense his fear or know his doubts, or even attempt to understand how lost he truly was. To her, Hop had it *all* figured out, their future laid out in a marvelous plan of his. *Sure, Lonnie and Sandra were unwanted surprises, but the box in the woods and the hospital...sharing this moment, here and now, was all Hopper's doing.* He'd saved her multiple times, and Eleven rapidly found that even if she doubted his actions, she couldn't help trusting his intent. Those memories from the forest... that red rubber ball...it had all worked out in the end. Surely she could withstand it from here on out...surely he wouldn't mind another question. "...you, don't?"

"No...no one does," Hopper informed her, then chuckled to himself and took a drag from the rolled-up paper. "Well...Will might," a tiny smile revealed itself, then disappeared just as quickly, fading away behind that plume of smoke. She watched him beneath the beaming sun, frowning confusedly. Hopper was seeing her from the corner of his blue eye, his cig smoldering to a butt, those embers gingerly tickling his fingers. With a blink and a shake of the paper, a blizzard of ashes tumbled to the deck, swaying this way and that. He stood, and El figured their conversation was over. He surprised her with a positive note, "...let's just hope it's not like that...*place*..." Hop nearly shuddered, opening his palms to her.

"...the Upside Down...?" she stood too, clasping his hands for support.

"Yeah...that place..." he sighed, leading her through the door. He glanced at her back, his mind returning to those jagged scars and those shoddy bandages. "How do you feel?" El shrugged, not quite sure how to describe the ache that occasionally throbbed deep in her chest. Sitting down in one of the dining chairs, eyeing the cluttered table, she fixated on a stray can of beer. To his relief, she grimaced, turning away from it reluctantly. *At least she won't try to drink it ever*

again...her voice caught him off-guard. "...why do you drink that?"

Hopper shrugged, opening his fridge searchingly, "...I like to." Eleven heard him mutter something under his breath, something he thought she couldn't hear, "...helps me forget." Her eyes dropped to the table, squinting at an open box of smokes, half-empty. Naturally, her fingers went to extract one, inspecting the rolled paper curiously and holding it before her bright, young eyes. Hop returned to the table and gently took the paper from her poised fingers, "Don't *ever* touch these...got it? They're bad for you." His voice was a tad stern, but she returned an equally stern glare.

"...then why do you eat them?" He stopped, meeting her stare as evenly as he dared, standing with that poison in his fingers a little dumbly. She waited for an answer, pursing her lips slightly and raising her brow as if she'd made a mistake.

The man took a second to eye the paper, scoffing to himself and grinning slightly, "...good point." With a flick of his wrist, he tossed the tiny thing to the side, and it landed on the table with a miniscule sound, rolling to the edge and falling over the precipice. The spontaneity of this simple action struck Eleven as *hilarious*, and out of nowhere, she **chuckled**, catching herself off-guard and stopping for a moment. She still hadn't curated that yet...her laughter. It was more of a breathy chortle compared to Dustin's giggle or Lucas' snickering or Will's shy chortles. Despite how odd it sounded, Hop couldn't help but smile too, the chuckles seizing him on their own accord. They shared their first laugh together as Hopper shook his head, wiping his eye with a finger. He sighed contentedly, walking to the counter and grasping a can-opener, positioning it over some chicken noodle soup. "...you hungry?" El nodded eagerly, her stomach quite empty from before. "Let's try and see what you can keep down," he said, piercing the aluminum with the unforgiving edge of the wheel. At the sound of the opening can, Eleven's smile immediately left her, and she craned her neck to watch him pour those watery contents into a tiny pot, setting it over a burner. Hopper turned back to her, still smiling from their beautifully natural moment, "...you ever try *Campbell's* before?" Taking in the solemn, suddenly emotionless plane of her face, Hopper's lips fell into an open-mouthed frown, blinking with confusion. After the smell hit her nostrils, El eventually peered off to

the side, blinking slow and memorable.

"...yes..." she nodded, her voice a ghostly whisper of what it'd been just before.

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: AHHHH IT'S BEEN SO LONG SINCE I UPDATED! HOLY CRAP. I missed this so much. There's little that compares to finally finishing one of these darned chapters. I don't know why but for some *stupid* reason, I kept having trouble writing in past tense. I kept switching tenses, then I had to go back and fix it all once I'd caught myself. Ugh...it was a nightmare. Does anyone else ever have that problem? I also found that, when encountering writer's block, a good bit of either piano or classical orchestral music helps clear it quickly. Can anyone else relate?

I really hope you guys enjoyed this chapter; it took me...well, an abnormally long time, considering it's less than 10K words. I appreciate all of your reviews and support. It really helps me keep on going, because I've had to get through SO MUCH writer's block these past few days. Also, it's almost Christmas! Can't wait for it to snow, then have to drive in it and try not to die. Wish me luck! Be safe in the snow everyone!

Thank you guys! You're the best! Follow for continued updates, and tell me what you thought. Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*



## 31. Dissonance

### Chapter Thirty-One – Dissonance

Wheels wore their way against the long strip of blacktop, snaking back to Hawkins below an old, sage Ford. Jonathan gazed into the night, the left lobe of his brain still swimming with every chord, every note and rhythm replaying itself in his mind, teasing the buzzing space of his ear canal. Will wore an almost permanent smile, humming the chords over in his head and replaying those deafening moments and resolutions. The drums had shaken his very bones in a way he hadn't thought possible, and all of his doubts concerning Jonathan's chances with Nancy or what was happening back home had quickly faded away with *The Clash's* first song. His older brother said that Nancy had insisted he take him, even admitting to Jonathan that Will would enjoy it more than she would. Nancy's honesty hadn't been especially crushing to Jonathan, and that made Will relieved. He was glad they were being honest with each other, though he could tell Jonathan was still a bit upset about it. He was being uncharacteristically quiet...Will thought he'd be enthusing about the many good songs they'd heard, like he had once they'd left the parking lot. Now, a silence hung between them, thick and strangely oppressive. The only thing that seemed to remediate the heavy atmosphere was the leftover humming in Will's ears, vibrant and colorful with *The Clash*.

"...how about we stop for dinner?" Jonathan asked.

Will shifted to eye him as they turned into a parking lot, still twenty minutes from home. "...shouldn't we be heading back?" the boy suggested in a reminiscent tone. He didn't know about Jonathan, but he couldn't WAIT to tell his friends and mom about the concert. Standing there before the flashing lights and synchronized musicians had made Will want to draw something, though he wasn't sure what. All he knew was that it'd be something good; he was helplessly inspired. There was also much to do.

"Mom said it'd be fine," Jonathan assured him. He switched the ignition off and smiled, a reassuring sign to Will, though it was a terribly good mask for how cynical Jonathan was truly feeling. "Come

on. I'll buy you whatever you want. Even dessert."

The younger broke into an unexpected smile at this news. "Really?!" he exclaimed, straightening up in his seat a bit.

"For sure," his brother nodded with a grin, his eyes unyieldingly gentle.

"Thanks man!" Will beamed, exiting the car with a tiny hop. Jonathan climbed out, squinting up at the diner they'd never been to before, somewhere outside of East Hawkins. Ensuring the car was locked, Jonathan followed a sprightly Will inside, catching the glass door Will had held open with an outstretched hand. He nodded a silent thanks and continued on, standing in the foyer of this chrome, brightly-cushioned room. Ovens, microwaves, toasters and coffee machines sat unashamedly behind the bar, the stools standing just on the other side, inviting and bright red. Will gestured to the bar stools, "You think we're allowed to sit there?"

Jonathan pursed his lips at the scruffy-looking man seated in the bar stool closest to them, eyeing the open seats between him and the next. A kempt man in a well-tailored suit sat at the very end of that line of red cushions, sporting a pair of thick, blocky sunglasses. The shades alone gave him a mysterious and unsettling appearance... though Jonathan quickly shook this prejudice from his mind, assuming he was doing just that, making unfair assumptions. "...I thought you liked sitting in the booths," Jonathan raised a brow at his little brother.

Will sighed, "Well...yeah. But that's only when Mom is with us. She won't know if we sit there..." A mischievous grin worked its way onto Will's face and Jonathan chuckled back. "It'll be like we're grown-ups."

Jonathan shook his head, smiling knowingly, "Believe me, it's not something to look forward to..." As Will pondered this underhanded statement, a middle aged woman – who could've been their mother – greeted them at the door.

"Good evening. Welcome to Clarksville Diner!" A tired smile accompanied her words as she pursed her hands into the pocket of

her apron, which was stained near the left breast with grease. *So that's where we are...Clarksville*, Jonathan made a note to himself. "Table or booth?"

Jonathan looked down at Will. *She hadn't even suggested bar*. Trying hard to hide his defeat, he said, "...booth."

"Okay! Right this way," she circled a rectangle in red along the edge of a diagram, and Jonathan knew they would have window seats. *The best kind*, he thought. Will followed, gazing up at the glistening surface of everything, as if it had all been made of chrome and wasn't the cheap imitation stuff. Maybe it was...Jonathan couldn't really tell. He was used to being deceived, and so he assumed it wasn't real. They seated themselves while the waitress left to fetch them a bottle of coke and a glass of chocolate milk. It was Will's tiny weakness... chocolate milk. Jonathan knew he'd eventually outgrow it – he'd gone through the exact same phase...only with a more embarrassing hankering for *strawberry* milk – but for now, he smirked whenever Will bashfully asked for the drink, as if it was something to be ashamed of. As if he were asking for a kid's to come with his kid's meal. They focused in on their paper menus, and an uncertain grumble convinced Jonathan to eat light. He already knew what tonight had in store...and it wasn't good. No...it made him not want to eat. But he needed his strength, so he ordered an omelet with peppers, sausage and onions. Will got brioche French toast, eagerly drenching it in syrup and digging in with his knife and fork.

From Jonathan's position, he could see the man in the suit at the end of the bar, bent over a newspaper, occasionally setting it down to jot something into a loose-leaf notebook, then picking it back up and continue reading. A cup of coffee sat beside the man's arm, but no steam wafted up from the stagnant liquid. Jonathan assumed he'd been there for quite some time, wondering if the staff perceived this man as oddly as he did. "Whatcha lookin' at?" Will's voice broke him from his shameless staring, and he focused back on the task at hand.

"Oh, nothing..." he sighed, bringing the bottle to his lips, swallowing that carbonated drink and setting it back down in a thoughtful manner. Will peered over his shoulder, helpless at the drawing curiosity. Naturally, his eyes scoured the room, landing on the suited man with the newspaper. His presence didn't strike Will as odd

though, so he absently turned back around, returning to his sugary meal with haste. While he was chewing, his eyes unknowingly lingered to Jonathan's plate, to his fork and knife poised in those familiar fingers of his, then back to his untouched food, an appetizing pigment of yellow, red and green.

Will eyed him, "Something wrong with the food?"

"No...it's fine."

Will knew Jonathan was the type to not send a plate back. Joyce, on the other hand, would've insisted. "...does it need ketchup?"

Those eyes, darker than Will's hazel ones, stared off so intently into the distance that Will was sure something interesting had caught his eye by now. When he turned, half-expecting to see some young beauty walking by, the scene was exactly the same; the only difference was that the man was now scribbling notes on a sheet of paper. "...what?" Jonathan broke the odd silence, shaking his head.

Will turned back to him, furrowing his brow in earnest. "Your eggs... do they need ketchup?" Jonathan glanced down to his plate, as if it'd just appeared there before his very eyes. "That always helps me... especially if they get cold or, if Mom overcooks them..."

His brother blinked, "...oh." A moment of background noise broke their words, a moment too long and confusing for Will. He started to wonder where Jonathan's mind was, and if it was even here, in this diner. "...no. No, I'm just not hungry."

"Oh...okay then..." Will inwardly shrugged and returned to his plate, nearly finished with his meal while Jonathan hadn't touched his eggs. If they weren't cold when the woman had brought them out, they most certainly were now, but Jonathan blinked past that. He was trying to gather his words...to find a way to ease Will into this painful conversation.

"...h-hey Will?"

"Hmm?" he mumbled past his last mouthful of toast, his plate now only striped over with the forgotten pools of maple.

"There's something I need to tell you..." he began in a hesitant tone, one that immediately scared Will. "...we were gonna wait until you got home...but..."

Will swallowed hard past a lump in his throat. He was only thankful it wasn't a slug, "...but what?"

"...no...we shouldn't talk about it here..." Jonathan shook his head, finally disagreeing with himself and decidedly gripping his coke bottle, unable to bring it to his lips again. His stomach already felt filled with glue, caked over with what little soda he'd had, compacting together into something he'd struggle with a few hours from now. Honing in on a napkin, the room caved in around his peripherals, gilded over with either chrome or imitation-chrome, glistening with that pleasant glow of early night. The glamor of this well-to-do diner was suddenly haughtily garish, and Jonathan began hating himself for bringing Will here, the thought of explaining things entirely escaping him, along with his appetite.

Will – trying to understand his brother's obvious distress over an unusually pleasant meal – leaned in and whispered, "...is it about Eleven?"

"No..." Jonathan sighed like the words were being dragged out of him by a rope. "Well...yes and no..." Will eyed him confusingly. *Which was it?!* "...it is but it isn't." A flare of misplaced anger suddenly welled up within the older boy, and he caught Will's gaze. "Why didn't you tell me you were sick?"

He watched those hazel eyes open up, widening at the realization of Jonathan's discovery. "...I'm not sick..." Even now, when he could see the truth in Jonathan's eyes...Will lied, unable to face it himself.

"Will, stop *lying* to me. I *know* about the slugs," he stated, blindly pushing his plate aside, closer to the window. The boy blinked, lowering his gaze to the sticky with spots of lethargic brown congealing to his plate. "Why would you keep this from Mom and I? we could've helped you...maybe brought you to a doctor..."

"Jonathan...they're from the Upside Down," Will stated in a curt soprano. "I don't think they could do anything...even if they tried..."

"Will it's **bad**. It *shouldn't* be happening..."

"I *know* that!" Will shot him an accusing glance. "I *just*...! I just didn't want you to worry. I didn't want Mom to worry..."

"That's our *job*! Will you could've *died* and we wouldn't have even known why!" Jonathan exclaimed, fighting to keep his voice low enough to fend off any unwanted glances or wandering eyes. Will's brow was pinched with shame. "Will...Mom's tough. She can handle it."

"...I-I don't know if she can!" Will burst out, making an open gesture with his hands in disbelief. He immediately sunk into his seat a bit as a few tired heads rose, glancing his way, then turning away dismissively. Jonathan glared at them all until each pair of eyes turned away, and he promptly refocused his attention to his brother. There was a glistening quality to his eyes – the kind that let Jonathan know he was scared – as Will spoke in a trembling voice, "...I barely can..." Jonathan's heart nearly broke as his brother brought a hand to his forehead, staring down into the table.

"I do. She didn't lose it when you were gone." Will eyed him skeptically. "Okay well...maybe she did a little bit. But I don't think *she* thought that. Because she was *right*; about the lights...about that, *thing*..." They both shuddered, Jonathan keeping his steely gaze firmly locked on him, never glancing away like Will did. The younger reluctantly peered into those now sharp, nearly blackish orbs, piercing with a dark intensity. "What matters is that you're *here*. You're not, gone like you were before. Mom will be fine with that. As long as you're here, she'll be fine. We just need to be there for her..."

The way he lingered on those last few words made Will nervous, bundling his nerves into tightly wound knots. "Okay..." Jonathan nodded, smiling a tired smile and looking down at his omelet. His stomach growled, and just as he picked up his silverware to cut into that cold egg, Will asked, "...what did you have to tell me?"

Jonathan's mouth became a hard-set line, and as his mind stumbled over itself to formulate an opening statement, the waitress reappeared, like a creature from some far-off plane of existence. She asked with an artificial smile, "Any dessert for tonight?" She eyed

Jonathan's plate, quite disconcertingly. "Oh...is there something wrong with your eggs?"

"Oh, no. No, they're great! I'm just...not feeling well..." Jonathan excused himself, shaking his head and gesturing to the plate. Will turned back to exchange a hopelessly lost glance with his brother, who appeared equally startled. "...do you want dessert?"

"I don't know...I'm *stuffed*..." Will lazed back in his seat a little comically. If they were at home, Joyce would jokingly suggest he unbuckle his belt to make extra room. Except they weren't home... they were in Clarksville Diner, struggling through a murky conversation and wading through the beginnings of a new one. *He needs to know*, Jonathan understood. If he could deliver this painfully raw message, Joyce wouldn't have to. She could focus on finding Eleven...and knocking some *sense* into the Chief. Jonathan wasn't sure what had gotten into him, all he knew was that he didn't like it. *Eleven wasn't a communal blood-bag*. He wasn't positive he even trusted Hopper anymore. Still, these were trials for different times, and Jonathan had to remind himself to remain on the task at hand: delivering the bad news.

"...we'll get the sundae," Jonathan pointed to a faded picture of a shareable goblet, stacked high with vanilla, strawberry and chocolate, bordered by two halves of (hopefully) the same banana.

"Coming right up!" she nodded, quickly walking back to the kitchen to dish out the treat.

Will gave him a curious look, as if to say, *I can't believe you're still hungry*. "We can share it," Jonathan offered, smiling that comforting smile.

Blowing some air through his lips like a teapot, Will sat up. "Alright..." he sighed, rolling his eyes sarcastically. "But you have to tell me, or else you're gonna have to eat it yourself."

"I will..." Jonathan assured him. "It's just...Will, it's not good news..."

This was when Will's brow pinched upwards in the center, and Jonathan tried avoiding that gaze. "...what do you mean?" he asked,

his voice searching. Another sigh, this time from the eldest. The man in the suit began folding his newspaper, standing up from his stool and adjusting his sunglasses, giving the boys an unreadable glance from behind those opaque rectangles. Jonathan watched as he took his paper from the counter and walked towards them, approaching his brother from behind. He tried to be discreet about following that suit and those hands, one wrapped securely around the grey paper, the other swinging from his frame in a natural motion that Jonathan found unbearable. Beads of sweat seeped from his skin, and as the man came within arm's length of his little brother, Jonathan raised his eyes to look straight at him, trying to see through those dark squares. The man returned his guarding leer, even going as far to turn his head as he walked by them, exiting the store and forgetting to tip the middle-aged woman (who probably needed the money). *Either that or he couldn't bear to part with a dime...* Will read his expression easily, his thoughts turning to this afternoon. "You know... that's pretty ironic..." Will spoke out loud as they watched the man in the suit climb into his car and drive off.

Jonathan glared through the glass at that same make of car, just a much darker liquorice compared to his dusty green. His voice bent slightly beneath the weight of his suspicions, "...what is?"

"...a guy stopped us on our way back to Mike's...he asked if we wanted a ride home," Will shrugged as a brushed goblet of ice cream was placed between them. As he thanked the tired lady with genuine sincerity, Jonathan turned to gaze at his brother, his older face open and frozen in some form of shock. He was overwhelmingly aware of the danger they were in with Eleven around, and Will's light-heartedness was even more unsettling. With a smile, the woman walked back to uncap some man's fourth beer, reminding him in a friendly tone to call a cab if he was going to continue. "It was just really weird..." Will shrugged, hungry eyes roaming over the melting dairy, spoon at the ready.

"...what was ironic?" Jonathan pressed, almost in a terrified daze. Will shot him a confused look, so he clarified, "...about that man who walked by, just now?"

"Oh...well, he got into the same kind of car..." Will observed, gazing out into the night. "And he was wearing a suit too...so I mean, that's



kind of strange..." Will reported all of this in an offhand, unconcerned tenor, bringing a spoonful of ice cream to his lips, smiling blissfully. After a moment spent savoring the sweetness, Will noticed Jonathan's expression; how he was tucked into the corner, staring at him with wide, unblinking eyes. *They hadn't mentioned that before he'd left...how coincidental.* "...Jonathan..."

"-what?! You think it's *that* crazy that they could've followed us here?" The presence of Jonathan's anxiety turned heads in the diner, and he quickly shot them all angry glances.

Will pretended to ponder this, lowering his voice to respond. "Well, *yeah*. We're not the one they want. Plus, they'd just be wasting their time coming all the way out here. We're not even in Hawkins yet." Jonathan shook his head, at the mercy of those unrelenting thoughts that took to racing about in his mind, like wild animals rushing from groups of hunters, each one struggling to survive, trampling each other in their haste. The prospect of Will becoming a target *entirely* unnerved him, and he wouldn't allow himself to linger long on that thought, choosing better to ignore the possibility all-together. "So... what were you gonna tell me?" Will gingerly asked, letting a bit of ice cream melt on his tongue.

Jonathan blinked, nearly numb with doubt, "It's about Dad..." Will froze, watching him with unwavering eyes of hazel. Jonathan stared right into those brownish orbs, creasing his brow and inhaling deeply, preparing to ruin their perfect night at the drop of a few words. "I'm sorry Will...it's a long story..."

Something was creeping up inside him, and Will thought he might be sick. It was the way Jonathan looked...it hinted disaster. "What did he do?"

Jonathan figured this would be his first thought. Lonnie always had an inclination for starting trouble, even when it wasn't on purpose. "He broke into the house while Eleven was home...alone. We were at the hospital with Mom...he and El got in a fight." Will leaned closer, his eyes stern and focused, his lips snapped shut in silent, attentive awe. "...Will..." Jonathan shook his head, fighting to release the words, pent up like earwax or mucus, clogging his pores with sweat. "...the Bad Men...they shot him." Will's eyes widened to new lengths,

and his lips finally fell open. "...Dad's gone Will..."

The spoon slipped from his hand with a clatter. For a moment, Will was certain his heart was going to bust through his sternum...either that or stop all together. The way Jonathan pursed his lips, how his sweat clung to him in tiny beads...how his eyes never tore away from his in shame or guilt made Will want to choke on the sweetness. "No..." was his first hollow response. Jonathan creased his brow as Will slowly, but very deliberately shook his head. "No...you're lying..."

Jonathan shook his head, "Will I wouldn't *lie* to you...not about this..."

"...NO!" Will shot out of his seat, backing away from his older brother. "You're *lying*!" His voice pitched with disbelief, in a way Jonathan had only ever heard when Will was throwing a fit or in an argument with Joyce.

"Will!" Jonathan rose to his feet, watching as tears welled in those wide, hazel eyes, how his limbs trembled with anger or sadness; Jonathan hated how he couldn't tell which. Before he could even hope to latch onto the younger boy, Will rushed by, *shoving* him on his way out the door. "Will!" Every head turned to the brown-haired teenager, their expressions laced over with absentminded suspicion. The waitress was holding a half-full pot of coffee by the handle from behind the counter, watching the boy dig in his pocket for some cash and throw it onto the table. Every eye followed him as he darted out after the younger one, calling his name into the darkness. The green papers lay like dead leaves in the fall, crumpled and bent at impossibly sharp angles, clinging to those syrupy pools atop Will's plate. *At least they paid*, she thought to herself, only semi-concerned about the severity in the boy's voices.

As Jonathan spun about in the parking lot, frenetic and crazed with worry, Eleven sat before Hopper's fireplace, snuggled within a blanket Hop's grandmother had stitched him. It was a bit of a family heirloom...though humble and worn in its appearance, it meant the world to him. It was the same way Hopper viewed his hat, and even as it sat on his coffee table, estranged due to recent circumstances, he couldn't help but regard it favorably, hoping one day he'd be

comfortable enough to wear it again. For now, it sat, waiting like a spider waits for his web to catch and jerk about violently beneath the futile struggles of its prey. Eleven watched the flames dance about behind that wrought iron grate, her face aglow with those fiery pigments of orange and yellow, her eyes reflecting the pirouetting strips. Tiny embers drifted up on the warm currents, like snow falling backwards, then eventually remembering the law of gravity and cascading back to the ground like lost birds. The fire itself reminded her of a flower in bloom, though she'd never seen one so red. The only flower she'd *ever* gotten the chance to truly look at was during her time in the forest, and it had been the most *beautiful* thing to grow after winter was done. It had been a cone flower with a brown sphere at the top surrounded by purple petals, draping off of it easily. Just the shape of it had reminded Eleven of her dress (well, Nancy's, to be more specific), and so she treasured the flower, tearing it from the soil and bringing it to her tree. Sadly, it had died within a week of being uprooted, much to Eleven's dismay.

Hop was smoking again on his deck, gazing out over the lake and keeping his gun close. He'd called for Joyce three times and hadn't gotten an answer. On numerous occasions, he'd considered leaving El alone to go check on her – because the heart-wrenching possibility of Joyce's endangerment had visited him *many* times before – but he could not bring himself to leave the child alone. Not now...not after she'd been through so much. A part of him was positive she'd be completely fine by herself, for just a little while...but he'd been positive about things before, and each time his expectations had rapidly unfurled themselves, fraying into horrible wrecks and realized fears. *Bring her to Joyce...you'd be safer there. At least a little closer to other houses...familiar faces.*

No. Hop shook his head, inhaling that smoke, illuminating the brilliant cinders in the dark and sending them to his feet with a tap of his finger. He turned back to gaze through the open door, at the tiny figure within, seated before the red flower, seemingly entranced. Sarah's tiger still intermingled – almost protectively – between her arms, blue eyes staring off like haunted gems. *At least he saw them that way...*he subconsciously tightened his jaw and lowered his gaze to the threshold. Her movement surprised him as she curiously walked across the tiny room, disappearing out of view behind the

wall. Taking one more drag from that cig, he flicked it to the side and went indoors, shuddering at the onslaught of warmth. If Sandra were still here, she'd be asking why he'd gone outside in the first place. She just couldn't understand what stress did to him. He wasn't even sure of the reason, but sometimes he simply *needed* to stand outside in that ticklish, icy air...breathe it in a few times, let it go to his lungs, hoping it could somehow clear his mind. It usually did, along with a cigarette to curb his thoughts; smoking was a bad habit he'd picked up after Sarah's death. His doctor referred to it as a "coping mechanism," assuring Hop that, "bad habits form quickest during difficult times," and that "it happens to everyone." *That last fact hadn't been very reassuring...*

Hop plopped onto his couch, bringing a can of Schlitz to his mouth and taking a swig. Eleven knelt before the TV, her finger going to the power button almost instinctively. It lingered there a moment, with some kind of hesitation holding it back. He hadn't thought of this: if she'd watched TV during her time imprisoned. *Probably not*, Hop presumed. He remembered Brenner's sappy words, spoken as if he actually cared for the girl...*the cruelest thing you could ever do to someone in captivity is push their face to a window*. He'd push Brenner into a window...he'd bash his skull right through the fucking glass. "...you wanna watch something?" he asked, and she flinched rather harshly, turning to eye him. His voice had apparently surprised her; he could read that look of shock by now, to his great relief. "Go ahead, you can...bill shouldn't be too high..." Hop sighed, crossing the room to sit in his red chair.

Eleven turned back to stare into the dark depths of the sleeping screen, then back to Hopper, blinking in confusion, her finger still poised over that spot. "...what...bill...?"

"...it's nothing. Don't worry about it," he dismissed her question with a wave of his hand, watching the fireplace and trying to decide whether it needed stoking sooner or later. With an absentminded blink, El turned back, pushing the power button and leaning back as the screen crackled to life. It was a different news reporter now, talking about something concerning tomorrow's forecast...*whatever a forecast was*. As Hopper listened in, craning his neck to peer over the short, cowlicks of her brown, tousled hair, she sighed, switching

channels. El thought she heard some tiny noise of frustration emanate from somewhere behind her...from Hop's belly perhaps, but she ignored it, trying to derive some meaning from this station. She failed miserably, watching these women stand around, point to things she knew nothing of and talk about how "nice" and "inexpensive" they were, and that they were "on sale if you called within the next twenty minutes." Even Hop couldn't stand things that, and he droned over her shoulder, "...skip." She did just that, unknowingly landing on PBS. She focused in on a man in a blue cardigan sweater, placing what appeared to be some sort of apparatus meant specifically to hold up drawings. Her eyes quickly went over what looked like children's sketches (they could've been his, she wasn't sure how good of an artist he was) as he walked away from the easel, turning to look right into the camera. Hopper recognized the familiarity of Mr. Rogers' face, smiling out at them from within the light-box. He was about to suggest changing the channel (having already formulated his biased opinions of Mr. Rogers years ago, knowing it was *very* uncool to watch him unless you were five) but he watched El's hand drop to her side, and she scooted to the right a bit so Hop could see the screen.

Mr. Rogers began to talk, sitting down on a bench and announcing to the audience in a contemplative voice, "...I may do some more drawing myself this evening..." El raised a brow, and Hop could tell by Mr. Rogers' movements alone that they were catching the tail-end of an episode. The friendly man crossed a leg over the other, saying with an odd sense of sincerity, "...I hope you'll try." Hop chuckled to himself, shaking his head and taking another sip as El blinked, obviously waiting for the man to continue with whatever he was saying. "Draw whatever you like, and show it to the people you love, and ask them if they like to draw too." Eleven had (subconsciously) thought of Papa the instant she'd seen Mr. Roger, smiling into the camera...but now she wasn't so sure. That image of Papa clenching his jaw angrily through a pane of glass or watching her with disappointment in his eyes as she was dragged away from him seemed to slowly fade away the more this man spoke. His voice was one of unexpected kindness, and the intimacy of it all made El stare in awe. There was still quite a bit of confusion surrounding these light-boxes, but she feared not; she could simply ask Hop.

The man in the box removed one of his blue shoes and was now holding it in his hand. El was still considering his wonderful proposal when he spoke again, in that same thoughtful tenor, "Sometimes other people will surprise you with things you never knew they could do." Upon him uttering his next three words, Hop knew what was coming next, and he internally braced for it, far too old to derive any enjoyment from Mr. Rogers' songs. This was his always live, fully memorized, and probably endlessly rehearsed, "It's Such a Good Feeling." For Eleven, the piano tiptoed in out of nowhere and she watched, enraptured with this live version of the thing Mike and Nancy had called music. It wasn't nearly as intense or thought-provoking as *Queen* had been, but the way the man tossed his shoe in the air and caught it in the other hand, smiling while his words tumbled along live piano music was unexpectedly charming. That's all El could think about in that moment; how happy he was, and how he shared that happiness with her through his song. And even as he sang about being alive and enjoying every new day, he was removing his cardigan and hanging it in a closet, then putting on the jacket of a suit, buttoning that together near the middle.

Eleven suddenly gathered that he was leaving and felt a twinge of sorrow. He began to promise that he'd be back when the day was new, and he'd have more things to share with her...and she would too. In some casual, seamless way, he went back to normal speech, bending down to pick up an odd-looking contraption, holding it up to show her, "...I brought...three sticks with me, and now, I'll take a whole little chair back," Eleven realized it *was* a tiny chair, and with a few grabs and pulls the man had disassembled it back into three collapsible sticks and a plastic seat. Hopper watched as Mr. Rogers playfully draped the floppy triangle over his head like a hat, smiling out at the viewers...and he eyed El, quite shocked to see the tiniest beginnings of a smile curl the ends of her lips, her eyes wide and warm with humor. Then, with a flick of his wrist, the plastic was flipped from his hair and he asked, "Do you ever surprise other people with the things that you do?" Mike's parents instantly appeared to her...staring like she was a two-headed creature from the Upside Down. So, like a child caught stealing a cookie, she pursed her lips and lowered her gaze to the floor. Hopper chuckled out loud at this question, remembering how El had sent him *flying* across the room upon waking up on Joyce's sofa, her first day back.

Then, the man asked, "Do you feel proud when they like what you've done?" This question had El looking back up at the TV, almost accusingly. The query made El think of Papa...smiling that snake's smile, all teeth and no lips, whenever El successfully completed a test or made another breakthrough for them. She quickly pushed thoughts of him from her mind, allowing it to damper her for only a second. This man was *not* like Papa...at least she didn't think so. He was too kind, *far* too gentle to even imagine the kinds of things Papa dreamt of on a daily basis. El wouldn't let his memory destroy her happiness...not in this moment.

Both Hop and El watched Mr. Rogers exit his home and walk down a few steps, pausing to deliver one final message to his audience, "You make each day a special day...you know how? By just your being you." Then, with a quickness in his aging feet, he said, "I'll be back," and exited the frame. The light drums and piano tunes – which had been playing comfortably in the background for quite some time – now took precedence as El thoughtfully turned to Hopper. He was so glad she did, even though she looked full of questions; he was just excited with what she had to say about that, possibly one of her first experiences with television.

"...what'd you think?" he asked a little too quickly, smiling in a knowing manner.

"...who...who is he?" The credits rolled, outlining her head and shoulders - like a chiseled bust – in words of white.

Hop removed the can from his lips with a tiny sound, "...oh. That's Mister Rogers. That's his show...*Mister Roger's Neighborhood*." El looked confused, turning back to the screen and shutting it off with a push of her finger, then turning back to Hop. Ironically enough, Hopper went on to say, "...Sarah used to watch him all the time. He was her favorite TV man..." Her brow knit with sorrow, feeling his sadness from all the way across the room. Suddenly, Hop was craving more nicotine, turning down and away from that open face.

Silently, El turned back to gaze at the dark screen. "Is he a good man?" She didn't expect him to answer...wouldn't have gotten angry if he simply stormed out of the house to go eat another paper. He'd tried to take her advice and not light them on fire, but she had a

feeling it was something *nearly* beyond his control...like a bad memory or some kind of phobia. A *hunger*. The closest thing El felt to addiction was socialization; she was simply starved of it.

Hop emptied the last few drops of beer into his mouth, setting the empty can and exhaling breathily with the taste of it dripping down his throat. "...yeah. I think so."

El smiled then, hoping he could find it in him to smile with her, "...me too." She took to looking down at the stuffed tiger and petting its fake fur. The sight was almost too much for Hopper, and a demonic, alteration of Brenner's raspy voice whispered in his ear...*one week to bring her here by yourself...understand?* A deep, discontented sigh erupted from within him and he rose from his seat, picking up the various cans or bottles that were strewn about his trailer. El watched him with worried eyes. *Had she overstepped her boundaries? Was what she was doing wrong? Was she just a burden to him after all...?* A crushing weight of doubt planted itself on her heart, squishing her confidence beneath it's ugly, broad feet, and her face folded up in despair.

In that same moment, white lights shot through Hopper's windows, and both heads snapped to gaze out, both pairs of eyes widening fearfully. Hop didn't have to tell Eleven that the Bad Men were around...she could feel his fear on the air, taste it in his words, despite him never hinting at anything remotely dangerous. Neither of them gasped or ran...in fact, they barely breathed. El stood up, now feeling better and very much awake, very much alive, and wanting to keep it that way. Hop went to her side, abandoning the trash by the counter and grasping her shoulder. The cans and bottles clattered noisily against the surface, tumbling onto the floor. They both flinched, turning back to glare at the noise, then facing the window. El noticed that the Smith & Wesson was already in his other hand, cocked and at the ready. *Now that scared her.* They listened as the slamming of not one, but *two* car doors sounded just outside Hopper's tiny, lakeside home...his last refuge; his final entrenchment upon this terrifying act of reckoning. Fear catapulted into their systems like anesthetics, and Hop spun the child to face him, gripping her shoulder firmly. "Get in the bedroom. I want you to hide there, just like you did before, alright?"



Before words could come, she rapidly shook her head. "...no. You-

"-NOW!" he boomed, that hand tightening around her scrawny deltoid in a tiny squeeze. Just as El opened her mouth to refuse or say something, *anything* to convince him that she could stay and fight, the doorknob viciously jiggled. They both turned to glare, wide-eyed at that slab of wood, mouths agape in horror. A bout of rapid knocks struck so quickly that each impact ran into each other, *rapraprapraprap*. That tiny beam of light shooting in from the old bullet hole went dark from the shadow of someone's leg, blocking out the light, and Hop took one step towards the door, his heart light as a feather.

*Rapraprapraprap.*

El creased her brow, glaring intently at the door, eyes full of half-baked hatred, preparing to crush the skull of anyone who dared walk through, no longer worrying about her condition. Hop stepped up to those timbers. He could *feel* the other person's energy from the other side, and he wondered if they were as wound up as he. *No...they've been planning this all along. They probably have us surrounded...* he took one breath of a moment to glance back at Eleven and nearly gasped. The child was currently glowering at the door, her forehead downturned in an uncompromising stance, that face painted over in the most basic compound of calculated anger he'd ever seen. He soft brow was furrowed to impossibly furious lengths, and before he knew it, he heard the tiny *tick* of the lock on his door...gently slide out of place.

Hours earlier, the wind raged over the tiny town, tearing its way down the friendly streets, combing its fingers through the trees and the grass. Sometimes, it mercilessly pushed against the boys while even more rarely, it blew from behind them, bolstering them forwards like some kind of sick prank. Will's hair was a frizzy mess of static and chestnut wisps. Mike squinted down his street, noticing a car parked in front of his home...Will's car. Or – he had to correct himself – Jonathan's car, and Nancy was sitting in the passenger seat! *They hadn't left yet?* Once Lucas caught sight of the two older teens, there was an instantaneous knee-jerk reaction. He cooed at Mike, wiggling his eyebrows quite suggestively. "Shut up..." Mike droned, walking his bike a bit faster down the road.

"Oh geez...I hope they're not swapping spit..." Dustin groaned with a playful edge in his voice, grinning at Will as he smiled, shaking his head. With begrudging sighs, they picked up the pace, driving straight into that unforgiving wind, and as Nancy got out, they shared their stories: how their bikes had been sabotaged and how they now feared for Eleven's safety. Nancy and Jonathan couldn't say they disagreed with them; they too had shared their doubts concerning the Chief of Police, and so, they concocted a very stupid, very *dangerous* plan. Before any of this planning began, Jonathan somehow coaxed Will to go with him to the concert.

"It'll be a good break..." he'd said, smiling down at him and into the billowing wind. Will was distraught, up in arms over everything...but he eventually caved in, much to his friends' silent surprise. There were so many things they didn't know Jonathan knew, so their awkward silences didn't strike the older two as odd. With a sideways glance, Jonathan and Nancy parted ways, a silent confirmation that all would be well very soon...they would all be together again, and they would regroup and rebuild what Hopper had torn to the ground. Will climbed in, rubbing his hands together and blowing into the palms as Jonathan drove away. It was a quiet ride; both their minds remained elsewhere, puzzling over what they would do and what still needed to be done. Will began doubting himself, realizing he'd acquiesced into an escape his friends couldn't afford (though he knew Mike wouldn't take it anyway).

Watching them shrink down the street, Nancy stepped back a bit, her hair flipping this way and that. "Let's go inside..." she said with a frustrated rush of her hands, attempting to manage her already uncontrollable locks. Dropping their bikes beneath the overhang of Mike's garage, they stepped inside, warmth returning to their bones upon crossing that threshold.

Lucas thought it *extremely* necessary to moderate this discussion with his own, sensible-reasonable voice, but his opinion only dissented from the rest, like dissonant chords in a work of music. "Guys...we can't just assume that he's working with them! What if he's just trying to keep her safe?!"

"Yeah, safe enough so he can bring her back to the Bad People," Mike retorted. Lucas shot him a helpless glance, staring into that fierce

glare, those dark eyes overshadowing his own. "We can't trust him!"

"But Mike, this is *Hopper*..." Dustin reminded him.

"Yeah! I mean...he basically saved Will," Lucas chimed in, much to Mike's boiling outrage.

"*And* he's the Chief of Police," Dustin articulated.

"Hop's the reason El came back Mike..." Nancy said.

"Exactly!" Dustin burst out with a wave of a hand. "Do you really think he'd have gone through all that trouble just to turn her in?"

"**Yes!** That's **exactly** why he did it!" Mike rose his voice, anger gripping him like a cord. "The Bad Men probably put him up to it just so they could get El back! I'm telling you, we *can't* trust him. We *shouldn't*." Dustin tried to convince Lucas to his side with an incredulous look, but he saw that realization creep onto the dark boy's face, slowly changing as he digested Mike's words. It suddenly made more and more sense to him, and deep lines of worry marred his brow, and he turned to eye Dustin.

"...that actually makes...sense..." Nancy spoke. "Yesterday, when he came to pick her up...he told us that he was bringing her back to Jonathan's..." Mike looked ready to jump from his seat, bustling about with an insatiable impatience for his sister's wandering words. "But when he left the Byers', Jonathan said he was taking El to a hospital...to...donate blood or, something like that..." Nancy reported all of this with a downturned, crinkled up face, shaking her head every so often.

She finally looked up to witness looks of horror and disbelief plastered across **all** of their faces. *This certainly changed things.* "...he WHAT?" Lucas demanded.

"See?! Why else would he lie to us like that...?!" Mike burst out, his voice full of hatred. Dustin dropped his gaze to the floor, brow creased dramatically. "We need to do something...*right now*," Mike declared, slamming an imaginary stake into the ground with a drop of his fist. He shook his head, pushing himself to his feet and pacing

the room, shooting looks of disdain Nancy's way.

"What?!" Nancy's look was piercing, anything but concordant as her voice stole an unprecedented amount of volume from the room. Mike froze and Nancy went silent, waiting as they all peered up at the ceiling, knowing Mrs. Wheeler was *just* upstairs with Holly. Once they were sure she hadn't heard them, Nancy continued in a piercing hiss, "Mike...you're not *actually* considering going against *Hopper*... right?"

The boys all turned towards their Dungeon Master, awaiting his answer, and as he eyed them all, biting his lower lip and discreetly breaking the skin, his reply was as solid and sound as granite, "...if that's what it takes to keep Eleven safe, I'm doing it."

Nancy's eyes widened, "Mike that's *crazy*! How are we supposed to outwit the *Chief* of Police?!"

He creased his brow, and even as the words left his mouth, he felt a pang of guilt swipe his chest. Struggling, he proposed in a stern voice, "...we lie."

Lucas rolled his eyes, clapping his face in his hands. He droned on his name in a tired way, "Mike..."

Nancy fought this ridiculous suggestion, "He can *tell* when people are lying, Mike! That's his job!"

"But he lied to us! Don't you think that's messed up?"

"It IS messed up! But we *can't* lie to the police...it's against the law," Nancy digressed, standing to meet his unrelenting gaze.

"No, what *he's* doing is against the law!" Mike retorted, visibly seething with fury...anger his friends knew was well-placed and reasonable. They felt it too...just not as acutely as Mike did.

"Mike, we should just go talk to him," Dustin suggested from his seat beside Lucas. "Eleven's probably with him right now."

"OR she's with the Bad Men already!" Mike fired back with such ferocity it almost surprised Dustin. *Almost*. He turned back to look his

meanest, staring right into his sister's eyes as she tried her hardest to maintain that deep, unamused frown. "We need to find him, *now*."

Through nearly clenched teeth, Nancy corrected, "We *need* to think of a plan." Dustin and Lucas watched in bewilderment as the siblings stared each other down, fumes practically whistling from each pair of hot, red ears. The boys exchanged worried glances, relieved to be out of the line of fire. It was like watching two live grenades sitting right next to each other on a slab of concrete, shouting that *they* would be the first to annihilate the other in some unchecked, random explosion. "We can't do it alone," Nancy pointed out in a barely gentler tone.

"We won't! Lucas and Dustin are *right* here," Mike opened his arms to his friends in an obnoxious, welcoming gesture. With each smart-remark and underhanded comment, Dustin and Lucas looked back and forth, as if they were watching a game of ping-pong between America and the Soviet Union. A long moment of unbridled silence settled between them, ready to scurry off within a moment's notice, at the very first move. Nancy felt so furious that she thought she could've wrestled Mike into the ground...but she didn't really want to ruin his day by owning him in front of his friends. Mike was *pumped*, clenching his fists and trying to foretell how this fight would eventually play out, unknowingly ready to wedge himself in the corner of the couch, shriek, and bicycle-kick his older sister. It wouldn't have been their first fight, and because of how light Nancy was and the few inches Mike had gained over the winter, they were now equally matched. At least, they liked to tell themselves that: Mike out of pride, Nancy out of pity.

If it hadn't been for Dustin, it may have come to that, but he stood up, arms outstretched before them like gates separating different species of animals. "Look...who's the *one* person we know who can talk Hopper down? Huh?" He turned to Lucas, who shrugged almost comically.

Nancy blinked, "...Joyce." Mike never abandoned that look of anger, his brow almost permanently knit at the center. This sort of cease-fire did help to soften it a bit, and Nancy spoke again, "...we bring Joyce. She'll know what to do...what to say."

"Okay..." Dustin nodded, smiling toothily at Nancy and turning to Mike, who was still simmering. He gave him a look, raising his eyebrows a bit and Mike sighed.

With a roll of his eyes, he exhaled, "...sorry."

"It's fine..." Nancy eyed him, pursing her lips. Lucas still looked prepared to tear them off each other, until Nancy managed a half-smile. "...truce?"

Mike maintained his stern leer, eventually concurring with a deep sigh. "For now."

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: I've got so much planned for this story. SO MUCH. Still, I'm open to suggestions and feedback (as always). I sincerely hope you guys are enjoying this as much as I am writing it.

I've got to let you know that I'm going to be starting college soon (sometime in early January) so I'll try and write as much as I can before then. And I mean, as much as I literally can. There's no way I can finish it before college starts, so I wanted to warn you guys that while I might be too busy with my schedule to update as quickly as I'd like to, I WILL NOT ABANDON THIS STORY. I can't do that after putting this much thought into it. But life happens, as you all know. I want to apologize in advance for the long wait. Don't worry, I've already started writing chapter thirty-two.

I love you guys! Thank you for the continued support, I REALLY appreciate it! Really, you have no idea how excited I get to read your guys' thoughts. It means a lot. Thank you very much. Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*

## 32. Blacklisted

### Chapter Thirty-Two – Blacklisted

Truth be told, Joyce didn't know what to say, much less what to do. Her emotions had been fluctuating in unbelievably torrential ways, like the arms of an ocean during a maelstrom, tumbling this way and that. One moment, she trusted Hop's intentions, and the next, it was all she could bring into question. It had been entirely too long since they'd spoken, and that meant either one of two things: nothing was wrong and there was no need to worry, *or...something had gone horribly awry and Hop had betrayed them. I just couldn't picture him doing that*, she thought. Then again, he *was* a police officer, from a big-time city with much more crime than Hawkins could ever offer. It didn't seem like that much of a reach for Hopper to double-cross them, working so hard to keep her safe just to return her all the same. Joyce gripped her wheel tighter, shaking her head and momentarily scrunching her eyes shut. And then there was Will, with his unknown maladies and incurable coughs. *You should count yourself lucky*, Joyce's conscience whispered to her, soft and gentle, like a distant pat on the shoulder. *At least he's alive...not like the Holland's daughter...not like Hopper's kid...*

She shuddered, wishing she could tell herself it was over...

*...but it isn't...is it?*

In the distance, lazy flashes of someone's hazard lights caught her eye. She was steadily approaching a parked car on the shoulder, yellow and red blinking intermittently in the dark. Each flash scintillated off her windshield, and Joyce wondered if the driver was okay. *You have to get home; you have bigger things to attend to...don't stop for this stranger!* Fully prepared to listen to her sensible voice, Joyce allowed herself to decelerate as she rolled on past the driver-side door, hoping to steal just a *quick* peek inside. *They could be having sex for all you know!* Thankfully, no such thing was happening...in fact, the car was empty, much to Joyce's surprise. *They probably needed the bathroom*, she assumed with a blink of her wild, frantic eyes. Pursing her lips, Joyce drove on, unable to dawdle any longer on trivial matters like these (she'd done enough of that at

work). Now was the time for action; she desperately needed to get home and find her daugh-...*Eleven*...and make sure she was alright.

As the greenish-grey Ford sped away, on towards Randolph Lane, a woman stepped out of the tree-line, adjusting the button of her formal, grey slacks. She'd been watching that car from the woods, waiting for it to leave, mostly out of embarrassment. Joyce had been correct in her assumptions: poor Grace Winters had a bladder problem, and the drive from the news station back home was too far, and well...when you had to go, you *had* to go. She just didn't want anyone else to know that. *Thank GOD that's taken care of*, she thought to herself, almost breathing out the words in a sigh. It didn't help that it was her time of the month, and as Grace rounded the bumper, suddenly becoming hyper-aware of the darkness surrounding her and the nocturnal sounds of the forest, a strange noise sent her heart leaping into her throat. It was like a frog being stepped on...squished into the dirt and squealing all the while. As it echoed between the tress, the rest of the forest went silent, holding its lush, green breath.

Icy chills coursed through Grace's loins, and those cheap heels froze to a halt on the pavement. Eyes wider than usual, she turned to her left, trying to gaze far into that woodland darkness...and failing miserably. The noise came again, this time *loud* against the silence... but still just as far away. It rendered an even harsher reaction from Grace's psyche. To her, there was an almost...*helpless* quality to it; a trembling imbalance that made Grace *think* it was a frog. *Maybe it got hit by a car...*it certainly wouldn't hurt to check, would it? *At least then you'll know*. Clenching her jaw, she bravely stepped away from the bumper, down the shoulder and towards the sound. She stayed outlined in flashes of yellow quite beautifully, but with each step away from her vehicle, she was cloaked in that much more darkness. The deer and the night-creatures refused her the comforts of their noise...immune to the curiosity that drew Grace closer and closer, *knowing* the danger that lie beneath their very feet.

Even though she'd just emptied her bladder, her fear was so acute it prickled her skin and made her have to pee again. It was that kind of fear, cold and numbing in the dark...*overwhelmingly* noxious. Grace kept on walking until she heard that noise again, this time so much closer than before and oddly sonorous. She glanced down, and to her



astonishment, she spotted a rusted storm grate. *Out here? In the middle of nowhere?* Well, she supposed it wasn't the middle of *nowhere*. If she kept walking in the same direction, she'd reach town in a meager five minutes. She could even see it from here, the lamplight shining like stars from another planet, winking at her from where she stood, encased in the dusk of wilderness. *So...why was this out here, so far from town?*

Another frog-like squeal shook her from her thoughts, and Grace nearly leapt out of her skin. Her eyes immediately shot down to fix on the grate: the source of those unearthly sounds. Whatever it was, it was too far in for Grace to see, and *much* too far for her to reach, utterly concealed by the almost midnight shadow cloaking the inside space. A part of her just wanted to make sure it wasn't a kitten or a puppy...something sentimental that *obviously* required saving. If it was a frog, Grace would leave it; these grates led to the sewers beneath town, snaking all throughout the underbelly of Hawkins...the likes of a frog would be fine down there. Kittens and puppies on the other hand...*she had to check. Just to be safe.*

Against all her better reasoning, Grace knelt down close to the opening, splaying her palms against the pavement. She brought one hand to rest against the metal, a few of her fingers casually draping between the bars...*like bait*. Grace made a *pst-pst* sound over and over again in quick succession, in hopes of drawing out some tiny, helpless ball of fur. Something did move around in there, shuffling about in the murky waters, seemingly drawn by her noise. Grace's heart swelled, "Here kitty! Right here, come on..." The noises suddenly stopped, and Grace figured it was scared, whatever *it* was. Her curiosity was piqued though, and quite foolishly, she reached a hand into the open space just inside the gutter, hoping to graze a patch of fur or some whiskers; hoping to be some small creature's hero, just for one night.

Instead, something *latched* onto her right hand, engulfing it with tiny, razor-sharp teeth, slicing away at her wrist like a *pin cushion*. Grace belted out a shriek, piercing the silence of the night, veering back and away from the gutter...but astoundingly, her hand held. It felt as though some unimaginable force was anchoring her to that very spot, holding her in place. The pain was terrible, biting and sudden, almost

too sudden for Grace to experience the worst of it...

...almost.

Screaming at the top of her lungs and pulling back with all her might, she yelled to the deaf trees and wise animals, "HELP! SOMEBODY HELP ME!" She tried projecting so her shouts would somehow reach town, but the vastness of the trees simply swallowed it up, absorbing every decibel (and there were quite a few). The slimy, knife-like mouth clamped another three inches, now past her wrist and halfway up her forearm. It's teeth – which felt as if they covered the *entirety* of the creature's mouth – seamlessly severed her brachial, carving away at her arm. Grace started losing more and more blood, screeching all the while, trying to pull back but somehow feeling fixed to the grate, like a magnet, stuck in place by some unseen entity. Suddenly, *another* creature yanked itself from the depths, *revealing* itself to her and latching onto Grace's free hand (which had been braced against the gutter seconds before, straining to push her back).

Grace now got a good look at the thing...rapidly taking into account that it was no ball of fur. This unearthly, nightmarish abomination was mostly black, about the size of her head, and practically immobile if it hadn't been for those tiny, peg-like appendages – of which there were four – sprouting from its sides. Its mouth was the only color variation it had...parting like a pink flower and shredding like a *cheese-grater*. "O-Oh...oh God!" Grace yelled, now feeling a sudden chill of shock wash over her. Helplessly, she wrenched her left arm upwards and brought it back down upon the edge of the grate, *slamming* the monstrosity against that corner with *every* ounce of her energy. With each thud, those tiny teeth sunk deeper and deeper into her flesh, causing her to cry out, tears streaming down her face. She was viciously trembling now, and if she hadn't urinated before, she would've pissed herself then. Still, against all her fears, she kept *smashing* away at that grate, hoping the monster would become concussed enough to release her. And miraculously, it did! Those tiny shards of bone left her forearm, and the beast itself dropped to the metal, gurgling in strange, alien-like groans. Then she took a moment to look at her dominant hand and nearly fainted.

What had just before been a canvas of gentle, light brown was now stained black with her own, oozing blood and some other gelatinous

liquid, coagulating into those open cuts like warm, sticky water. She yelped at the sight, visibly trembling while her other hand was being used as a chew toy. With a distraught scream, she reached down into that grate, grabbing the remaining creature by what felt like gills on a fish. This one was about twice as large as the first, and wouldn't by any means fit through the opening. Grace was petrified, somehow still functioning despite losing all sensation in her right hand, the numbness creeping up her arm like spiders on a web. The pins and needles only heightened her terror, and without thinking, Grace grabbed the subdued creature to her left and *stuffed* it back into the grate, mouth first. There was a monstrous shriek as those teeth grated away into its own kind, and like an animal, she kept crashing them into each other face-first, hoping she'd eventually be freed. *Freed to do what? Bleed to death in your car?* It certainly sounded better than dying on the side of the road.

Just when Grace could taste victory, just when she could feel those rows of teeth releasing her from their tearing grasp...that same unseen force *SLAMMED* her skull against the rusted metal. The smaller of the two beasts dropped to the bottom of the sewer as Grace's arms fell limp, and she crumpled over herself like a wilted plant. It was as if she'd been pushed from behind in some pre-meditated act of vengeance...but there was no one there. As Grace's brain suffered a massive hemorrhage, bits of her cranium piercing the grey, she slipped out of life quite suddenly, like a cigarette being snuffed out by a shoe. The feast continued, eventually pulling her with them into the sewage-laden underbelly of Hawkins. Her car remained, coughing up streams of smoke while those hazard lights blinked, far too telling of what had just transpired twenty yards away.

Eleven's stomach held like glue, like a hollow stone had pitted itself in her gut, and whenever she thought of how things had turned out, how hopelessly lost they'd become...she wanted to cry. Hopper shot a look back to glare at her, noticing how focused she was on the door... how, *furious* she looked. She did not glance his way, glowering forebodingly at the slab of wood before them, and before Hop could turn to prepare himself, she was squinting her eyes and *wrenching* her head to the left. Using those sacred abilities, (of which she was *still* learning to control) she *ripped* the door open, causing it to careen into

the house and *slam* against the opposite wall, driving that old familiar dent just a little bit deeper. Hop blindly aimed his gun at the first person he saw, until he recognized the people who stood before him. Both groups were equally ready to end each other, like war-torn brothers meeting on the battlefield, guns at the ready, wearing different colors on their backs, rendered motionless, unable to pull their triggers.

"...H-Hop?"

"*Joyce!*" he exclaimed, those blue eyes soaking in the light from her car. Her hands flew to the space beside her head, open-palmed and trembling. She eyed him incredulously, feeling his fear on the air and seeing it in his eyes, even in the piercing light. As he squinted into the quasi-darkness, he could make out the form of two kids bunched together, the taller blocking the other from harm. A rock sat poised in one of her hands while the other gripped her brother's shirt quite protectively. Nancy's expression was wrought with fear and relief, all painted together at once. The piercing look of shock on *his* face stopped them in their tracks, freezing them like the flash of a camera. None of them moved a single muscle, and it took Hop mere seconds to realize what they'd thought...

...he wasn't too astounded they'd come to this conclusion.

Unsure of what else to utter, considering the horribly tense situation, he parted his lips to offer, "...truce?"

Hours earlier, the older of the two Wheeler children had walked the length of town, all the way to the Byers' home. Mike's bike was ruined and Nancy wasn't allowed to drive a car by herself yet...much less with Mike right beside her. *They'd both be dead meat.* Rounding that forested corner, Mike scoffed, "Why are we even here?! Eleven could be in danger, and we wasted all this time walking to Will's house when we should've been finding the Chief!"

Nancy plodded to a stop, sighing in exasperation, "Mike, I already told you; Joyce will know what to do. She can drive us there once she gets home." Mike grimaced, seething with fury so potent Nancy could practically smell it. "...just be patient. She should be here soon." They approached the house, side-by-side, walking in relative, thickening

silence. Mike wouldn't trust him...not now, maybe never. Trust was something that had to come on its own, voluntarily. It was something you couldn't force on anyone, and right now, Hop had been anything but trustworthy. They planted themselves on the front porch, and Huxley greeted them with wagging tail and plentiful kisses...kisses Mike disdainfully shrugged off. He clacked over to the boy (in serious need of a manicure) and licked his cheek adoringly.

"...no...go *away* dog..." Mike muttered, gently pushing him towards Nancy, trying to bide his temper.

She scoffed, "Don't get mad at Huxley...it's not *his* fault." Mike watched her run her fingers through his wispy, yellow fur, and a twinge of jealousy burned deep in his throat. He *wanted* to be that happy...but he just didn't have it in him; not until he knew Eleven was okay; not until she was here with him...watching the stars like they had the night before, holding hands in the grass and talking about whatever came to mind. El wasn't much of a talker, but that was just fine with him. Mike figured he could talk enough for the both of them. *Just to be together and know the other was okay*...it was all he desired. As the cold seeped through their clothes and into their skin, Huxley rested his chin in Nancy's lap while Mike jiggled his knee in an endless, erratic rhythm. Nancy watched with eyes of blue, her brow creasing deeper with each second that passed. She turned to eye him, "...Mike, *relax*. Everything's gonna be okay..."

The jiggling stopped sharp, and he turned his head to face her, his hair hanging from his head in a disbelieving fashion. "You don't *know* that!"

She burst out with a throw of her hands, "You know...*you're right!* I don't! But...*come on* Mike. Think of everything he did to get Will back!"

"Yeah, okay. That was *Will*. He doesn't *know* Eleven. She's not his responsibility; Will was," he explained, simplicity driving his words. This was anything but simple.

Nancy eyed him, "...are you saying she's *yours*?"

His eyes squinted in the dark, accusingly pinched. "...NO! I'm *saying*

that if the Bad Men know she's back..." He trailed off into a painful sigh. "I just don't think we should trust him. I mean-" he cut himself off, gazing out at an oncoming vehicle. They both stood as Joyce's Ford rolled onto the lawn. Just the sight of them, their pale faces illuminated by the glow of her headlights...she could tell something was wrong. *Why else would they be here?* For a heart-stopping moment, Joyce thought Will might be in trouble. Stepping out of her car, – still donning that blue vest – Nancy met her halfway, a look of concern knitting her eyebrows together. Mike looked furious, not with her or Nancy, but with the very *universe*. It was like he'd been dealt a bad hand and didn't know how to acclimate...other than feeling sorry for himself, when in truth, Eleven held the bad hand.

Nancy turned back to Mike, then to Joyce, the beginnings of an explanation on her lips. It surprised her when Joyce spoke first, nodding her head understandably, "...I'll drive you to Hop's." Without a second's hesitation, Mike pushed past Nancy, throwing open Joyce's car...then, struggling with the collapsible seat. The women watched for a moment, then turned back to eye each other.

"...you know what's going on with him?" Nancy asked.

"No," Joyce admitted. "That's why we're going there."

Now, they stood on the threshold of a trailer, on the edge of a lake, stunned into stagnant silence. Mike was peering past Hop's shoulder, his brow as tightly-knit as his sister's. El could see them now, silhouetted against the moonlight. Her throat nearly closed up with happiness, recognizing their faces in the darkness, "...Mike."

"El!" He rushed forwards, pushing past Nancy, then Hop, and finally wrapping Eleven in his arms. She did the same, her heart pitching about behind her sternum, gripping him close to her like a lifeline. A patch of blood leaked from her left nostril, but besides that, she looked in good health. Sure, her color could be improved...but at the very least, she was here...*alive*. As the two embraced, resting each other's heads in the crooks of their shoulders, equally enthralled with the other's presence, Nancy and Joyce remained at the door, staring at Hop in a questioning manner. Wordlessly, he stepped aside, allowing them in. Just as he pushed the door shut, Mike reluctantly separated from her to ask, "A-Are you okay?"

Much to his relief, she nodded, bringing a sleeve up to wipe her nose dry. She looked as if she were fighting back tears, overwhelmed with seeing them, seeing *him* so soon. She'd figured she'd have to wait much longer, but here they were! "...yes," she nodded, and he watched her eyes as they drifted to another. As a smile of reconciliation crossed his lips, he turned to see Ms. Byers, standing before them with her eyes locked on the girl.

Joyce watched her a moment, *knowing* in her bones that Hop hadn't forced her into anything against her will; convinced with the simple fact that Hop would never turn her in...at least not willingly. She could see it on El's face as it opened up, clear and free of stress. *She agreed to give her blood in order to save Hopper's friend...*this factor began to reveal itself to Joyce like a snail, pouring itself out of it's shell and gripping fast to the first thing it touched...this being Joyce's mind. There was no way El could've known the repercussions would be so severe. The tragedy of it all revealed itself only to Hop as he observed them, like a kind of spectral presence, present...but only partially there. Another, deeper part of him was digging for options in a nearly desolate goldmine. Only *he* could see where and when this would end...and how much it would rip this breathtaking picture to shreds, taking the time to burn each individual piece into nothing more than chalky ashes.

Joyce shook her head, biting her lip and approaching the child, encompassing her with arms of love in a motion most natural. Much to Eleven's mirth, she smoothed her fingers through those brown locks, whispering, "Oh honey...I was so worried..." El stood, breathing in that maternal scent she'd gone so long without. *How long had it been? Just one day?* It felt like three moons ago since she'd last seen her, and the feel of Joyce's leather jacket began to slowly imprint itself upon Eleven's brain as a feeling of home. It still managed to hold the cold in from outside, and it generously seeped into Eleven's cheek, dimpling her flesh over with innumerable, tiny bumps. There was that lingering perfume of cigarette smoke mixing almost fragrantly with Joyce's natural scent...but strangely enough, El found it all the more comforting. With Joyce's hand cradling her head, her ear mere inches from the woman's beating heart...she knew now was the time to relax. If those knocks on Hopper's door had been from another hand...*was Eleven even ready to consider that option?* She

wasn't sure. It scared her, more than she'd liked to admit...but it came as no surprise to her how *ready* she'd been to kill whoever entered. It had certainly surprised Hop, witnessing her internal wrath ripple from those cold, shattered eyes. Seeing them crowded together like that while she was preparing to end them all with merciless intent was the only thing that had surprised Eleven. *She supposed she got that from Hop.* The faint murmur of Joyce's consolations drifted lazily about the air, cooing gentle words into her ear, words that brought Eleven a kind of rapturous tranquility. The siblings couldn't help but look to Hop, their glaringly opposite eyes overflowing with questions. Hop swallowed a pit in his throat, breathing it out in a sigh.

"...you have questions," he discerned in a tired contralto. Joyce and El separated at the drop of his voice, and El blindly reached over to take Mike's hand in hers. His brow rising with surprise, he glanced down at their hands, fingers entwined like cords on a rope. Mike's anger subsequently derailed at this tiny gesture, and he gazed up at her just to see her gentle smile, like a blessing or a painting...rare and beautiful. To her relief, he smiled too, bashful, and as they gazed into each other's eyes, thinking about everything and nothing at once, Nancy glanced down at something brushing against her foot. A stuffed tiger stared back up at her, its eyes sky blue and absent. Her heart was still racing, the stone lay cold in her hand...she felt as if though they weren't done running yet. *Perhaps they weren't...*there was no way for her to tell. *Take a breath...relax. She's okay, she's here. It all worked out.* For some reason, Nancy's thoughts turned to Jonathan, and she wondered how well *his* night was going.

He shuffled about in the parking lot, stomping to his vehicle and tearing the door open. It lay empty, so he ripped himself from the passenger side, turning to shout into the night, "Will! Where are you!?" The moon hung above him like a cat's eye, glaring and bright amidst the black fur of night. Jonathan paced about, his shoes occasionally scuffing the blacktop. "Will!" His brow pinched as his fears slowly got to him, truly shaking his core with those unrelenting memories of last November.

Will watched him from the shadows, crouched between a decorative bush and the foundation of Clarksville Diner. Warm tears slipped



down his face, and he wiped his flushed face against the blistery wind. It shook the bush like a rag-doll, and as that leaking sorrow trickled down to touch his lips, they tasted bitter with confusion. *Now* he understood Mike's fear; how anxious his friends had been when that car stopped them, that smiling man peering out at them, like some kind of circus clown. He gripped his biceps a little tighter, listening to his brother call for him in the dark, "Will!" He squeezed his eyes shut against that voice. *Was his father really...gone? It couldn't be. They wouldn't really do that, would they?* He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen him...Lonnie hadn't come back to visit his now *living* son, even though Joyce - out of sheer generosity - extended an invitation. No phone calls...no letters; Lonnie's motives were purely for personal gain...just as Joyce had surmised. Still, her youngest was left unaware concerning Lonnie's objectives, juggling the impossibility of his death along with something else...growing inside of him like a black fungus.

For a second, Will thought he was going to be sick as a deep movement disturbed his gut. In the next, he was *sure* of it, and he wrenched over to cough into the ground, gripping the piercing thorns of the trembling bush for support. Shockingly, nothing came up, not even a hint of the sundae he'd relished just moments before. His throat burned like fire, scratching his esophagus like nails on a chalkboard. Jonathan spun around, squinting towards the diner, "...Will?" There was a draw of silence as Will held his breath, enduring that engulfing itch for five seconds before hacking into the dirt again, failing to bring anything up. Jonathan rushed to the line of foliage and peered over it, finding his brother easily in the shadows. He reached a hand down to grasp his jacket and yank him from behind those tiny branches, dragging him to his feet. Jonathan could tell his brother was sick, maybe even having one of his episodes. It wouldn't have surprised Jonathan if he ralphed a slug right onto his shoe; it didn't matter to Jonathan. Will needed to hear this, so he gripped the boy's shoulders firmly, exclaiming, "Don't EVER do that again!"

Somehow, Will managed to respond between hacks and wheezes, "...w-what!?"

"Run away, on *purpose*. D-Don't you get it?" Jonathan's voice was one of indescribable disbelief. "Mom and I almost lost our *minds* trying to

find you! I'm not putting her through that ever again, and neither are you!" Will stopped coughing, as if his brother's words were throat lozenges, curing his sickness with every numbing syllable. For a long moment, Will peered down at the ground, guilt-ridden and ashamed of himself. Sure, he could tell Jonathan that he'd rushed out so the people in the diner wouldn't have to see him cry, but that was bullshit, and Jonathan knew it. The older took a moment to breathe, each exhale billowing in white, puffy clouds, "...okay?!"

Will nodded, quiet and solemn. "...okay. I'm...I-I'm sorry...I was just-" A violent cough bit his throat, cutting him off, and he made sure to slam an arm over his mouth. Jonathan eyed his punctured hand, tear drops of blood escaping from tiny spots. Neither of them knew it was from him gripping the bush so hard, those tiny thorns piercing his thumb and forefingers easily, like needles.

His brother sighed, nodding and loosening his grip on Will's frame, "It's fine...it's fine..." Will nodded into his elbow, his face scrunched up as the pain stung his esophagus. Jonathan could see tears glinting against his face, and he stepped closer to ask, "...are you okay?" Silently, Will nodded, but Jonathan knew better. His breathing alone was a racket, wrought with wheezes like some kind of old air conditioning unit. With a tiny chuckle, he said, "...I thought I told you to stop lying." Those hazel eyes glanced up, wide and fearful, knowingly reading Jonathan's worried expression like a map of their home...like a map of Hawkins. For a minute or two, they simply eyed each other, Jonathan challenging his brother with that piercing gaze, and Will absorbing every ounce of his anxiety like sparse pollen. "Come on...let's go home," he said, taking his brother by the shoulder, more or less leading him to the car. As they both climbed into it, Jonathan's hand instinctively went to the ignition, turning the key in its hole. The Ford roared to life, sounding especially outraged for some odd reason. Luckily, Will's breathing was starting to sound better.

"...that doesn't sound good..." he noted in a raspy tenor, listening to the ancient vehicle rouse itself to life.

"Yeah..." the teenager furrowed his brow, turning left out of the parking lot and towards Hawkins. They were approaching one of the many tolls Hawkins had surrounding its border, and for some

peculiarity, one had to pay to get *into* Clarksville, but *entering* Hawkins was free. *Figures*...Jonathan internalized. They slowed a bit, and as they drew closer, Will dug about for change. The yellow striped arm of the gate glinted at them behind the glow of their headlights, and Jonathan turned to avoid the blinding glare. He noticed a man standing inside the booth, gazing out at them from behind a thick, glass wall. The boy's figured it was his job to sit around all day and collect travelers' money...but this guy was staring at them, *really* staring; like a bird watches a mouse...or how a person recognizes another. He was harshly focused on Will, and Jonathan challenged his gaze with a cold-blooded leer.

"...Jonathan?" Will's voice was an indiscreet murmur as his brother fixed his gaze, a cold hand gripping his spinal cord mercilessly. Icy chills rushed through his nerves, and just as Jonathan felt his confusion and anger come to a head – because this man was *still* staring them down like pieces of meat – a car horn sent him jumping out of his seat. "Jonathan, go!" Will smacked his arm, all too aware of the cars behind them.

"-oh! Right," he righted himself. The arm had lifted long ago, and they'd sat there a good ten seconds. They drove away, even as Will held out a pile of coins in his open palm, turning in his seat to eye the toll confusedly.

"...don't we have to pay?" Will asked.

"...no. Only to leave...there's no price to enter Hawkins," he stammered, trying hard to focus on the road.

"...oh. Well *that's* weird." After a moment of silent agreement, Will shifted in his seat towards his brother, regarding him curiously, "...what is it?" Jonathan could see this shift in attention along his peripheral, but he could've been blind and still sense Will's distress. It was all painted over in his voice.

"...nothing. I just...hadn't noticed that the gate was...open..." he bumbled, adjusting his fingers around the wheel.

"...look who's lying now?" the boy observed nonchalantly.

Jonathan scoffed, "I'm not lying! I just, *didn't* notice it!"

"...sure you didn't," the wizard hummed almost comically. He was feeling pretty wise, but to Jonathan he sounded like a wise-ass.

"When we get home, we're telling Mom about the slugs," he declared, a hint of spite tainting his words.

The boy's confidence instantly plummeted, "...what?! No!"

"Why not?" Jonathan stole a second to eye his brother, then turned back to the road. "I know you don't believe me, but I'm telling you: she can *handle* it. She can help! We shouldn't be keeping secrets from each other. It'll just pit us against each other!"

The younger slumped back into his seat like a dead flower, "But she doesn't *need* to know!" He sat up and articulated, "Jonathan, *please*. I don't wanna stress her out any more! She already has to take care of Eleven...and I don't wanna add this onto the list of things she has to worry about!"

As the Ford rolled off into the night, it's passengers bickering haplessly over the trivial, the man in the booth brought a radio to his lips, muttering into the speaker, "This is Outpost Three...I have eyes on the boy. He just entered province...please advise." Reluctantly, he set it back down onto that crowded desk, eyeing the pictures splayed before him...one of a boy, and the other, a girl...who didn't *quite* look like most girls. Both were smiling, not a hint of fear in the young boy's eyes. The girl – on the other hand – looked pretty meek and fearful...some kind of huge secret lingering behind those dark, bright pupils.

A voice finally responded after a minute of static-filled silence, "Good. Keep the other outposts updated; they are not to leave Hawkins, by *any* means."

"...roger that," he nodded into the receiver, regarding the portrait shots and wondering...*what could they have done? Why did the Department of Energy have them blacklisted?* Just looking at the boy's smile perpetually boggled him, but the girl...he could imagine her committing some massive crime...*maybe even murder. Why else would*

*she shave her head? She's obviously dangerous, just as they said...but the boy?* It had him thinking long into the night, painting out grand theories in his head, trying to guess at all the unspeakables they'd done, all of the crimes they'd committed...eventually tearing each one of his brushstrokes down by morning. *They're just children*, he'd told himself. *There's no way they could be as dangerous as they said...*

"Hop, she's *just* a **kid**!" Joyce's voice echoed in the dark, bursting with unrestrained backlash. The dirt held firm beneath their shoes, and despite the good bit of space they'd planted between themselves and his trailer...bits of their conversation could still be heard, reverberating back to the children as they shamelessly peered through Hop's window. They were two shadowy figures in the dark, one vastly shorter than the other. As Joyce occasionally gestured about with her arms, (undoubtedly laying into Hop for being so selfish) Hop stood, silent and pensive...like a guilty statue. Eleven watched him eye the ground and felt an overwhelming urge to rush outside and *demand* that they stop fighting. Mike and Nancy turned to each other as El stared, her brow pinching with worry.

Nancy spoke low, as if they would be able to hear them, "...what else could they be talking about?"

"She's probably going off on him! He deserves it..." Mike replied rather harshly, not a hint of mercy coating his words. Hazel eyes glistening in the dark, El blinked at the scene before them, her focus flitting down to the window pane. She remembered times when they'd been so much happier, so much kinder to each other...*is it going to be like this forever? All...because of me?* Mike turned, sensing this shift in atmosphere on El's end like a waning magnet. Nancy was ready to argue on Hop's behalf...but she couldn't bring herself to do so. She wanted to think Hop had relinquished every bit of information, that there were no more secrets between them...but she couldn't be sure. There was no way of knowing. "...El?"

She turned to Mike, obviously distressed with how Joyce was *yelling* at Hopper, "Yes?"

"H-How's your back?" he asked, trying to keep eye contact, but feeling that same bubbly sensation in the pit of his stomach whenever they locked eyes.

Blinking back her fatigue, she reached a hand back to feel the bandages. "...I don't know..." she admitted, unable to see those three long scars. Mike and Nancy exchanged another glance, but this time El turned to eye her as well, looking very meek herself.

"...I can check for you," Nancy offered calmly, hoping it would ease Eleven's mind. After the young girl nodded, she offered her hand, and El took it, following Nancy into the bathroom. Mike stood at her departure, pursing his lips and turning back to the window, flopping onto the couch and sighing to himself, clapping his chin in a palm.

"Joyce..." Hop sighed, shaking his head. "They're onto me. They *know* I have her..."

"Oh, so you think it's just *okay* for you to take her and, *disappear* whenever you want?!"

"Joyce...you don't *understand* the stakes..." his words were laced with that same, broken-record exhaustion they usually harbored during times like these.

Joyce shrugged this off, "Then *tell* me! *Tell me* what the stakes *are*, Hop! We agreed to work *together*!" She paused for a moment, her frustration showing itself in the falling light. "She..." the mother shook her head, and Hop caught his breath when he noticed the glimmer of tears on Joyce's cheek. "...s-she *needs* us. And I..." Hop waited, his eyes welling up, refusing to give, like the sturdy, eroded arms of a dam. "...**I-I** need her," she admitted, blinking back more tears that threatened to spill out.

There was a long silence between them, intermittent with the primordial sounds of wilderness, and the moon regarded them with that same, cat-like contempt it had while gazing down at Jonathan and Will. He thought of everything he'd put her through this past week...Lonnie's death, the transfusion...*how much more could she take?* The whispering noises from that stretch of forest lingered about them, like words on a wire, drifting along the wind, gentle...yet oppressively present. They were always there...always playing, unless something prompted them to stop. Their problems were petty squabbles to the forest, and each tiny noisemaker saw no reason to go silent, despite Hop and Joyce's all-consuming stress. It was as if they

knew that both parties would eventually reconcile, clinging to the faith the estranged couple found so hard to harbor; and so, the forest music continued, humming in the dark. Baby fawns trailing behind their mothers...owls learning to branch in the dwindling winter night. Crickets.

"Hop...*please*. I need you to be *honest* with me. I need to *know* these things..." Joyce plead. *She must be referring to Brenner's demands.*

He sighed heavily, "Joyce..."

"**Hop**," she took a stern tone with him as Mike watched from the window, squinting into the darkness. "...I *need* to know. *We* need to know." Blue on brown, like ice and stone, clashing upon each other with unblinking resolve. "...I need to know I can *trust* you."

Nancy closed Hop's bathroom door, turning to gawk at the enormity of pills and beer cans he'd left strewn about. "Ugh..." she expressed her disgust, grimacing at the younger girl. "...I didn't think he'd keep his place like this..."

"...hurt," El murmured, eyeing Nancy defensively. As a question tilted her dainty head to the left, Eleven continued, "...he is hurt." The maturity of this young, young child *staggered* Nancy...*I hadn't thought of it that way*. "...it's why he drinks...to feel, better..." El explained, nodding to an empty beer can. *After everything she's been through... how could she trust him so easily?*

"...I thought...maybe...you'd be, angry with him. For...taking your blood," Nancy fumbled, her gaze lowering to the floor.

Surprisingly, Eleven softly shook her head, maintaining her determined stare. "...no...just scared." Losing her focus for a moment as she dwindled too long on memories of the hospital, Eleven blinked, "...I helped him...he...helped me." She remembered him calming her down in that terribly cold hall with the slippery floor, how the white lab coats had been *all around them*, like ghosts.

"I didn't know..." Nancy trailed off. "...I'm glad everything worked out okay."

El smiled a tiny smile, blinking agreeably, "...me too."

A short silence ensued until Nancy sighed, looking to the shirt that was currently covering her back. "...okay?"

After a moment's hesitation, El nodded, "Okay." She turned her back on Nancy, reaching for the bottom of her shirt and lifting it over that mess of brown hair. The new bandages told Nancy that he must've changed them. It was a comforting reminder for the girl who hardly knew him...it seemed Eleven knew him *much* better than Mike or her **ever** would. *And they'd only spent a day together.*

"...I'm gonna take these off...okay?" Nancy asked.

El fought back a grimace, "...okay." She remembered – with great reluctance – the last time Nancy had patched her up, shoddy and unsure of herself. It had been all the worse for Eleven, at the mercy of that agonizing pain and Nancy's trembling hands. Surprisingly enough, Nancy's hands did not quiver this time...her heartbeat had finally slowed down. Hop had been smarter in his job, making sure to tape the gauze onto itself *instead* of Eleven's skin. This way, Nancy could just shift the bandages up a bit and eye the wounds...which didn't look much better than they had before. "...bad?" El asked, splaying her fingers against Hop's bathroom floor and peering over her shoulder at the girl.

"...not as bad as before," Nancy tried to sound optimistic, smiling over at her. Eleven did not smile, and Nancy asked, "...does it hurt?"

She watched the girl nod to herself, affirming Nancy's worries, "...yes."

"...all the time?"

El shut her eyes, noting the dull ache that seemed to sharpen itself to a sudden head. She caught her breath, "...yes." Dropping her gaze to the floor, Nancy lowered the bandages back over the wounds, and those shoulder blades jumped at the slight sting.

She heard that sharp inhale and quickly hissed, "Sorry..." El nodded almost understandably, closing her eyes and balling her fists against



those clumsy hands. The worst of it was over, and Nancy patted her twice on the shoulder, "Okay...go ahead and put your shirt back on." Once El was clothed, she turned to eye the older girl, both of them sitting with their knees folded beneath them, in comfortable silence. "...we're gonna get you some medicine so you can feel better. The cuts will go away...but it'll take time." Nancy tried to sound confident. To Eleven, she sounded terrifying.

"...medicine?" El asked, a hint of terror in her voice. She remembered the needles, those gloved hands leaving bruises on her biceps and forearms...Papa's look of disappointment.

"...yeah. It'll help," Nancy blinked for a moment, trying to explain things the way Mike did so patiently, with such heart. "It makes you feel better when you're sick. It takes the pain away," she managed.

*"Yes, yes. It's your Papa. I'm here now. Shh, shh...you're sick. You're sick, but I'm going to make you better. I'm going to take you back home where I can make you, well again. Where we can make all of this better, so no one else gets hurt."*

"...I'm not sick," she stated quite decidedly, watching Nancy with hurt, scared eyes. The slight crease of her brow said it all...unfortunately, Nancy couldn't read her just yet.

Nancy looked taken aback, "Oh...I never said that you're sick. You're just, hurt..." El looked away, trying to fight back those horrid flashbacks. Seeing this, Nancy gripped her shoulder, "...I don't know what happened at the hospital...or when you gave blood..." That was funny, because neither did Eleven. There seemed to be a big chunk of time missing between the needle slipping into her vein and waking up in Hopper's home. The scary part was...Eleven had known she was slipping away with each drop of blood. There had been nothing to stop it, no instructions...except to keep squeezing that red rubber ball. "...all I know is that it's over now. Joyce will take care of you. You'll get to see Will *all* the time...and, you can visit Mike and I... *whenever*," Nancy consoled with a knowing tone and a warm smile. El beamed at this news, feeling very much relieved at Nancy's words. "Here...let's go see if they're done 'talking' yet," Nancy joked in a casual tone.

And just like that, Eleven's smile deserted her. Nancy noticed this and felt like shoving her foot in her mouth. *You idiot! First the medicine, now this!? Just, shut up for a while, so you don't make things worse!* Nancy mentally screamed these guidelines to herself, opening the door and watching El pad back over to Mike, joining him on the couch. Mike had been prodding a beer can, but he quickly dropped it and righted himself on the sofa, grinning at Eleven happily.

His words were drenched with joy, "Hey! How is it?"

"...bad," El announced in a tiny voice, glaring outside at the lonely couple. Mike's smile dropped. "...needs medicine..." she added in a worried tone, turning to Mike fearfully.

"...oh," he sounded, that smile slipping away from his face. There were so many unknowns...*how had the Displacer Beast found her? How was it able to bring her harm in the In-Between, of all places?* They seemed to be telepathically communicating these questions to each other with every passing second, that was, until El turned back to the window. Mike stared at her profile for a moment, then eyed Nancy, who looked just as consumed with these unanswerable questions as he felt. She had a finger curled over her mouth, cradling her chin as she puzzled the enigma. Her lips parting in a silent gasp, El watched Joyce leave Hop with a flurry of hands and a shake of her head, heading towards the house. Eventually, Hop tossed a glowing ember to the ground, abandoning it in the driveway. El guessed it was probably one of his eating papers, watching him as he slowly trailed far behind the distraught woman, hardly looking up at all.

Joyce burst into the house, sighing to herself in the doorway. Hop joined her and they both walked in, closing the cold out behind them. Six eyes were on them: blue, brown and hazel. Hop and Joyce eyed each other warily, and she pursed her lips, turning back to the children (who had obviously been watching them through the window. They hadn't even made an effort to hide it). "Okay...I'm gonna bring you two home..." Joyce began, gesturing to the Wheelers. "...I'm sure your mother wouldn't want you to be out any later."

Without missing a beat, the siblings eyed each other, exchanging looks of horror and accusation. "...did *you* tell her we were leaving?"

Mike demanded.

Nancy remembered Mike rushing ahead of her, knowing the way to Will's house by heart. "...no! I thought *you* asked her!" she shot back, her voice rising with disbelief. Those dark brown eyes widened with a fear indescribable. *They were both in for it when they got home. There wasn't even a point in **going** home now...they may as well be surrounding themselves to a prison.* Hop wanted to chuckle, that twinge of humor tickling his stomach. El eyed them absently, going from Nancy to Mike, then back to Joyce.

With a small chuckle, Joyce suggested, "Well, we should probably get going then..." Mike shot from the couch, rushing towards the door, then skidding to a halt in the doorway, turning to Eleven on the sofa.

"What about El?" Mike asked as Nancy joined him by the door. By this time, she'd risen, peering at Hop curiously.

"Oh, she's coming home," Joyce assured them, walking over to El and easily taking her hand. El smiled up at her, then eyed Mike warmly.

"Okay..." Mike trailed off, his gaze landing on Hopper. The Chief watched the young boy shoot him an unrestrained glare, furrowing his brow deeply. Then, without another word, Mike took his anger outside, Nancy following close behind.

Joyce peered down at Eleven, "You ready to go home?"

Just hearing that word, *home*...it meant the world to her now. "Yes," she nodded, gently slipping her hand from Joyce's, much to the woman's confusion. Silently leaving her side, Joyce watched as the girl walked up to Hopper, even more confounded. "...t-thank you," Eleven said, peering up at him knowingly. Hopper said nothing in return...silent in all of his anguish. He was still reeling from what he'd told Joyce just before...

*"...I need to know I can trust you," she said with a softness that surprised him. This was what enraged him: the fact that those closest to him now questioned his every action. Hop had been feeling this way for so long...strung along by Brenner's will, numb to nearly every emotion besides humor. In a way, Hop knew he was only putting off the inevitable.*

*Brenner's demands rang loud and true in his brain every time he slept. He didn't sleep much anymore. If only she understood what was on the line; everyone she knew and loved...her **children**, at risk of Brenner's contempt. He'd already killed Lonnie...who knew what else he was willing to do? How far was he willing to go to get Eleven back? How much could Hopper wage on this deadly deal? There was no structure to this chaotic mess: no Plan A, no Plan B. He hadn't gotten that far yet! If he told Joyce what was at stake, then she'd REALLY lose it.*

*...how much was Hopper willing to bet for this strange, science experiment?*

*With a firmness Joyce could only find in Hopper, he admitted in the hallowest of tones, "...you can't." She stood, thinking she'd heard him incorrectly at first...then recognizing that look of determination on his face. He truly had said that, and probably meant it too. Hop's heart hung like a boulder in his chest, splintering off in various sectors, cracking open at the crushing blow of accountability.*

*He could hardly feel a thing.*

*"...alright kid. Maybe I'll see you around..." He looked so sad just then, his blue eyes half-lidded and glinting indiscreetly. He could've left me there...in that place...the hospital.*

*But he didn't.*

*"...are you coming too?" she asked, turning back to Joyce. The woman eyed her, a look of sorrow and longing plastered across her face.*

*"...no. I'm staying here," he said, giving her a half-hearted smile. El turned back to give him a shocked, disbelieving look. "...Joyce'll take care of you. Don't worry." There was a finality in his words that scared the girl...she wasn't ready to say goodbye to Hop, not yet. El peered up at him for a moment then, sorrow bending her brow. *Perhaps they had parted ways...would they fight forever?* She looked to Joyce, who was standing by the door, gazing at Hop...already beginning to regret her decision. El had a feeling something had happened outside...words were said. But words were words, El rarely used them. She internalized *action*, and if bringing her back from the*

throes of death wasn't enough to prove his worth...*what else was there?* El had to show Joyce that she *trusted* Hop, and so, on impulse, she hugged Hop's midsection. His purpose held honest and true to Eleven. *Why could no one else see it?*

Hopper thought of all the other songs she still had to listen to...all the other shows they still had to watch. All the sunsets they *could* watch together...with Joyce seated on her opposite side. It was a fantasy he often dreamt of in his darkest moments, and now, when it seemed impossible and terribly out of reach...there was that tiny flicker of hope Eleven seemed to immortalize, shining through those bright, hazel eyes. He felt like choking up as he softly patted the space between her shoulder blades, avoiding Joyce's heartbreaking gaze. As she pulled away from that tiny embrace – the kind Hop had grown so numb to until now – she looked up at him and asked, "...s-see you around?"

He chuckled softly, smiling that broken man's smile and replying with, "...you bet." *He at least hoped so.* With a tiny smile, El returned to Joyce's side, giving Hop one more backwards glimpse before stepping out into the moonlight. Joyce and he exchanged a brief glance, and for a second, Joyce appeared ready to pour her heart out to him. Hop quickly turned away, giving her the cold shoulder and gazing absently at his black television screen. He rubbed his brow with his thumb and forefinger, realizing that - before today - he'd had NO idea how to socialize with children. In fact...he'd purposefully avoided them for quite some time after Sarah's death, to stay detached and keep that part of his life desolate and covered with dust. Now he was reverting back to his oldest ways, slowly but surely...unless he changed things. The next time he turned, the woman he admired so fervently was gone...the empty doorway left open in the cold, draft of night.

El climbed into the back, and just as Mike was about to climb in after her, he blurted out with a jump, "...oh! I forgot something inside. I'll be right back!" He sprinted back up the lawn, reaching his door just as Hop was about to push it shut. Letting himself in, he glared daggers at Hop, puffing out his chest and subconsciously broadening his shoulders. "Why'd you do it?" he outright demanded.

The Chief blinked, incredulous, "...what?"

"Lie. You *lied* to us when you said you were gonna bring her back to Will's. Why?!" Mike exclaimed, the anger creeping up from his spine, boiling his ears a deep shade of red. His fists were clenched, down at his sides like weapons.

Hop shook his head, pacing about for a second to stop right in front of his coffee table so he could gaze down at his hat. He was going to repeat this same story to him, and he already knew the boy wouldn't care. "...one of my officers was shot. He needed blood...and she was the only donor with O negative...she-"

"Why didn't you ask *Nancy*? Or *Jonathan*?! My Dad would've given blood! He does it *all* the time!"

"...he needed *that* specific blood type. We had to hurry...he was going to *die*," he tried to stress with his monotone, turning to eye the boy. Mike blinked back his fury, finding it *that* much harder to respect this grown-up when all he'd done was lie to them. *What if he was lying right now!*? "...you should go back to Joyce. Don't keep your parents waiting this long..."

Pursing his lips out of sheer fury, Mike stalked to the door, stopping just before it and turning to face Hop's back. The man expected his door to slam against the frame, (as per the usual of kids Nancy's age and below) but what surprised him was the severity in Mike's words as he spoke to him, almost like a growl, "...you're working with them, aren't you?" Hop turned to face him, eyes half-lidded in the dim light of his home, half-expecting Mike to continue. The boy's rage shone through in the flicker of his eyes...almost like dark, brown sparks. "They want you to bring her to them, don't they?!" His voice was beginning to quiver, like his fists, shivering from this sudden outpouring of rage. The way Hop watched him, semi-amused and blatantly surprised only sharpened his wrath. "You're not bringing her back! **I won't let you!**"

Hop crossed the room in three slow steps, leering down at the furious child, visibly shuddering with anger. If it was any more apparent, his ears would let loose bursts of steam like a train whistle. Before Mike could prepare himself, Hop rested a strong hand on his shoulder. He spoke reassuring words in a hollow, eerie baritone, "If I was working *with* them, she'd already be gone." This was not very comforting.

Mike couldn't see Hop's plan...*he* wasn't even entirely sure of it *himself*! But he was beginning to think of something...an escape, for *all* of them. It would pitch them out of the quarry he'd dug them all into, back to relative safety. Brenner would undoubtedly abandon his chase after that; of this Hopper was certain. But he knew himself well enough to know he needed time to think...*alone*. It was better than bearing the weight of ridicule, especially by Joyce's word. Mike blinked, his mouth slightly agape, "Listen...I am *not* going to turn her in-

"Why wouldn't you?! Isn't that what you did *last* time?! That's how they found us, isn't it?!" Hop had to give it to him; he had heart. He also knew too much...*far* too much for a twelve-year-old to balance...

...he hadn't considered Mike's role in bringing Will back, the amount of **brains** his friends and he possessed. It was out of the question for Hop, who was so accustomed to flying solo that when help was offered to him, he was too proud to take it. "Things are different now!" his voice rose to match that of Mike's disbelief. "Look, I know it doesn't seem like it but we're still in a pretty bad waters." Mike knew this, and he pursed his lips in anger. "You *need* to believe me. I am *not* going to turn her in." Mike creased his brow at him, wringing free of his grasp and straightening up to give him his best leer. "...I just need to come up with something that's gonna keep us safe..."

The boy took a second to absorb the Chief's statement, honing in on the word **safe**. "...you mean we're in *danger*?!"

Hop's blue eyes froze open, wrought with shock. *I shouldn't have said that*. "No. It's not like that..." he droned, eventually blinking at himself. He couldn't believe it...*how had he just allowed himself a slip of the tongue?* Joyce's horn beeped twice, and they both glanced outside at the billowing clouds of steam emitting from the tailpipe. "Listen to me," Hop gripped his shoulder one last time, righting Mike in place. "I am *going* to take care of this. Alright? She's **not** going back there."

Mike still found it impossible to trust him. There was still *so* much to discuss; so many outliers; so many possibilities, and he *knew* Hop wouldn't listen. This guy knew it all, and concerning the Bad Men and Hop's "master plan," Mike knew next to **nothing** besides the fact

that Hop *did* in fact know it all. The only thing he'd learned from this heated encounter was that Hop had an unbreakable resolve...and some kind of fire fueling all of his actions. Mike wasn't sure what it stemmed from, or if it even mattered. The cold night air began to seep into his t-shirt, and he began wondering where he'd left his jacket. That was when Hop reached over to the couch, grabbed the green coat and *slammed* it against Mike's chest, pressing it into his arms. "Now go home," he ordered like a drill sergeant. "...before your parents start to worry." Wordlessly, Mike nodded, shuffling towards the door. His jacket hung from his arms like a dead animal, and the moment he crossed the threshold to stand on Hopper's porch, the door was closed behind him. Hop sighed, turning away from the frame and back to the fireplace. Sarah's tiger sat before it, as if it'd been placed there by some thoughtful individual, as some kind of friendly keepsake. He drew close to it, crouching before it's absent, blue eyes. Opening the grate with a slow move of his hand, he watched as the flames danced before him, threatening to draw him into a sleepy trance when all he wanted to do was stay awake...

...he picked the animal up and pitched it into the fire.

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: HAPPY NEW YEAR! \*sighs\* I'm quite late, I know. This is one of those stepping-stone chapters that comes before the real action picks up. I know, it was a bit slower-paced; lots of dialogue... lots of feelings. BOY...HOW ABOUT THAT BEGINNING THOUGH?!

Thank you guys so much for your patience and continued support. I meant to update WAY sooner than today. I had even planned on doing it ON New Year's Eve or New Year's Day. Unfortunately, life got in the way (as it so expertly does nowadays) and...let's just say things could've been better. I missed this story so much and can't wait to start writing again. Hopefully life calms down a bit with the changing of the year. Means I have more time to write with these beautiful, messed-up characters.

If you've enjoyed this story, feel free to follow or leave a review if you wish. It means A LOT to get feedback/criticism, it really does. Other writers understand.



Until next time! I hope your New Years' celebrations went better than mine did. Happy 2017! Congratulations! If you're reading this, it means you're alive.

Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*

## 33. Reconciliation

### Chapter Thirty-Three – Reconciliation

As the car bumped them on towards Maple Street, Mike and Eleven sat in the back, shoulder-to-shoulder, gazing out at the passing wilderness as it rushed by them in blurred pigments. It was dark, WAY past Mike's curfew and barely before Nancy's...they'd be lucky to get away with one day's internment. Since it was so late, the trees (along with the belly of the road) flashed by in mostly suppressed, dark colors...lazy browns and vivid blacks, all careening endlessly backwards into earlier times. Mike blinked out at them all, bracing his elbow against the tiny window while cupping his chin in his right palm. Against her fatigue, El watched him survey the dark, blinking thoughtfully at him. His hair seemed to mesh perfectly into that obscure color, so stark against his otherwise pale skin. Just then, a vapid rush of warmth billowed up from her stomach, cascading throughout her chest and fluttering to her cranium...and it made her cheeks warmer. El turned away and blinked, thinking she must be sick with something. In a single absentminded movement, she snuck her hand next to his, and to Mike's surprise, he felt it resting there beside him.

Oddly enough, it was icy cold to the touch, and he glanced down at this now familiar gesture, then back up to her. He beamed, as if this were their own, little secret. She smiled back, blinking slow against her exhaustion, and Mike gave that cold hand a tiny squeeze. Whenever they were like this, they fell deaf to the rest of the world as it collapsed upon itself into vague oblivion. Eleven figured it wasn't like the In-Between, no...it was so much more sacred to them. There was an air of *belonging* she felt in moments like these, and it was something she could *never* aspire to experience while trapped in the empty nothingness that was that dark, foreboding place between worlds...so far away...yet so close to Eleven's touch. No...the two even managed to blissfully ignore Nancy's avid questioning, even as she pressed her dire curiosities. "So...you're saying, we *can't* trust him?" Nancy demanded, trying to be as polite as possible with Jonathan's mother.

Joyce sighed, looking very frazzled as she adjusted her grip on the steering wheel. "...n-no. He..." They listened with hesitant ears as Ms. Byers broke off into a burdened sigh. "...he's on *our* side. We can trust him...he just, needs some...time. To sort things out on his own..." Mike knowingly pursed his lips, gripping her hand a tiny bit tighter. Joyce felt pretty comfortable saying she knew the kind of man Hop was: a loner, from the very first day she'd met him. That wasn't about to change anytime soon. *His soul was so doggedly stubborn when it came to things like change.* Some solidarity would be good for him, and until he came forth with the kind of decision they needed, some plan of action for them to follow...she would give him as much breathing room as he needed. He'd been pretty clear with her on the lawn. Joyce peered into the rear-view mirror just as Eleven lowered her eyes to the floor. Mike gave her hand a reassuring squeeze, hoping it would cheer her up some. She just scooched closer, resting her head on one of his bony shoulders, her frame expanding with each gentle inhale...the beginnings of a yawn pinching her eyes shut and creasing her brow

Nancy cut in, hoping to coax more information out of Joyce by feigning knowledge. "He was acting...*really* weird, wasn't he?" Fishing for support, Nancy turned back to eye the younger two, and as Mike fervently nodded, Eleven softly shook her head. Feeling this negative movement against his deltoid, he creased his brow and watched the girl. Likewise, she held her head up to do the same, realizing their dissension. Even Nancy seemed confused, staring at the two and nearly jumping when Mike's voice chanced the silence.

"...so you think what he did was *okay*?" Mike captured her gaze, closely scrutinizing her now, trying to figure it out. Nancy's brow jumped to her forehead, and El straightened up, blinking back her lassitude, feeling the sleep reluctantly leave her. She shook her head, earning an even more appalled look from Mike. Those dark irises squinted questioningly, almost accusingly at her, "...*how*?"

El blinked at him, taken aback by his anger. "...I did it," she stated, trying to voice her willingness to save the officer's life. It had been a decisive matter...hadn't Mike realized that already? Nancy's blue orbs were a mere distraction as the two children stared at one another, absent looks plastered almost painfully to both of their faces. The

more she eyed him, the more uncomfortable he grew, slowly backtracking and rehashing his argument.

"...I-let's not worry about Hop right now...how about that?" Joyce suggested, breaking the thick-as-molasses-silence.

Nancy chimed in with a halfhearted sigh, "Sounds good to me." Eleven held her gaze, still very much perturbed with Mike's outrage when his glare faltered.

With a breathy exhale, he apologized, "...I'm sorry. It's just..."

"Mike," Eleven cut him off, never removing her eyes from his. Tentatively, he dared that resolute mien. "...he's a *good* man," she assured him, stressing the word, mindfully placing Mike's perception of Hop as far away from Brenner as she could manage. A swell of emotion struck Joyce just then, listening to this child vouch for the man she'd known for so long. Wordlessly, Mike's eyes dropped to the floor, feeling the emptiness of his left hand so acutely it stung his chest. Then, as if on cue, El reached over and took it again, clasping it in her own with gentle reassurance, "...promise." He pursed his lips, turning to peer out at the passing trees and foliage. El blinked in defeat, knowing he didn't believe her.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't convince him. He was already prescribed to this suspicion with a potent ferocity. Blinking against the flashing hues of nature, Eleven scooped closer to him, joining him by the window and gazing out into the darkness. With their hands still intertwined, there was a deep, subdued yawn, and Eleven resigned her cheek to his bony shoulder, watching the world fly by them, slowing down and speeding up again at Joyce's control. They stayed this way for a solid two minutes, but each second was a kind of ethereal, dreamlike bliss. It was obvious they didn't agree concerning Hopper's supposed allegiance, but it didn't hinder them in the least; not nearly as much as it tore at Nancy and Joyce's minds. They had bigger, better days planned ahead: Eleven knew they still needed to play catch together, not to mention the *enormity* of games Mike had to teach her. He could feel her eyelashes fluttering shut like the tired wings of a butterfly, and as their precious time ticked away, the car came to a slow stop. Mike realized Eleven had fallen *asleep* like that, her cheek pressed so harshly into his shoulder. *Didn't that*

*hurt her at all?* "Hey...El," he softly rocked his shoulders and she immediately shrugged awake, gazing at him through misty, hazel eyes. "I uh...I have to go now. I'm home."

*Home.* As far as she was concerned, Mike's home was as much hers as Joyce's was. "...okay," she nodded, smiling at him and rubbing the sleep from one eye.

A little awkwardly, (because Nancy was already standing outside, rubbing her hands together and waiting) Mike copied her action. "...okay! Goodnight El."

"Night Mike," she replied in earnest, relieved he hadn't said "goodbye." She'd grown to hate that word, with a burning passion... *especially* after today's events. Reluctantly, they disengaged their hands (Mike's were especially clammy for some odd reason) and the Dungeon Master crawled over the folded seat. After he practically *fell* out of the car, Joyce reached over and righted the cushion, smiling at them through the open door. El peeked between the two headrests, out at the siblings she'd grown to love.

Nancy gave her a little wave and a tired smile, "See you later El."

"...s-see you," El smiled back, though her eyes were blinking slow and sleepily. Then, the door was closed, and El took a second before lounging back into the seats, yawning even deeper. Mike and her watched each other shrink out of view as Joyce knowingly drove off, puffs of carbonated emission blurring their vision. The woman instinctively tensed her jaw as something fierce gnawed at her curiosity. She was certain El wouldn't mind – much less realize – if they took the "scenic" route...Joyce just had a strange feeling about something from earlier that night. So, almost on impulse, she started making light conversation with the sleepy child in hopes of curbing her own tumbling thoughts. "So...how was giving blood?"

El blinked, pushing against the seat to sit up properly. She'd nearly dozed off, had it not been for Joyce's question. "...scary," was her honest, one-word reply.

There was a hiatus in the conversation as the woman carefully selected her words. "Well you *know*...most kids don't donate until

they're at least *sixteen*," Joyce shared.

The girl's eyes widened at this. "...sixteen?" El repeated the number, feeling as if it lay eons ahead of her measly twelve years.

"Yep! That's...*normally* the age people start giving blood," Joyce turned a bit in her seat to glance El's way.

It was strange to El. Joyce spoke of the action as if it was normal, and El was pretty sure her side-effects were anything but. Then again...normal was a relative term. What was normal to Joyce was alien to Eleven. "...do you?" she asked, a bit unsettled with her tangling thoughts.

Joyce scoffed in an amiable manner, waving a hand and reporting, "Oh no! I *hate* needles." Upon hearing this news, an unexpected wave of relief washed through the girl's veins, like some kind of human anti-freeze. Joyce had (up to his point) appeared effortlessly brave and courageous. Eleven was undeniably soothed to know she and this strong woman shared this tiny phobia, perceiving the slim but strong connection they now shared. It was easy for her and Hop to connect, despite her first doubts; he was broken in a way Joyce had never experienced. Eleven knew what it felt to be that shattered.

"...m-me too," Eleven chirped, watching her from her spot in the back.

"...you were very brave to do that, El," the woman reminded her. Joyce wished she could stare right into those sorrowful eyes, even if they lowered to the floor out of remorse or some kind of chagrin. She yearned to drive the message home...but someone had to drive the car. Peering into the rear-view mirror, she watched El do exactly as she expected. She peered down and away, towards the seat, and the heat rushed to her face and neck. Even after her time spent with the Byers and the Wheelers...and Hopper of course, she still wasn't accustomed to this kind of praise. It felt...*forced*, despite its natural flow from Joyce's mouth. El didn't think she deserved such adoration. Her next question surprised the child, who figured *he* was the last person Joyce would want to be talking about right now, "...did Hop help you through it?"

"Yes," El affirmed in a small voice, watching her through the tiny mirror from the corner of her eyes.

Then, she saw the woman smile, nodding knowingly to herself as if she were remembering some long-lost friend or deceased relative in a brighter light. "...he's *really* good at helping people..." Joyce spoke with a note of sincerity Eleven easily detected. It comforted her to know Joyce still cared...that her love for him had not been pulverized. Just altered. They turned onto Randolph Lane, and Eleven immediately recognized the trees and bushes lining the infamous Mirkwood. Discreetly watching the bits of brown and black rush by, El tried to peek into the trees, as if she'd be able to find the box she'd depended on so long ago. *Was it that long ago?* Eleven sighed to herself. Here she was again, juggling those relative terms she'd come to despise. Joyce went on to say, "...when he and I went to save Will, we went there...into that *place*..." The woman sighed deeply, shaking her head in frustration. *She could never remember the damn name...*

"...Upside Down," El reminded her.

"Yes...t-that place ..." Joyce chuckled, grasping an imaginary fruit from her branch of thought. It still boggled her how much this child potentially knew...especially when it came to places Joyce didn't think existed. *Until now anyways.* "...Hop went with me, and, he *helped* me get through it. He *saved* Will...we both did. But...if he wasn't there..." El leaned forwards in her seat a bit, rapt with Joyce's sincere countenance. "...h-he truly is a good man. I *knew* he would help you...I *knew* it..." she trailed off, some twinge of uncertainty still lingering along her words. But on the whole, she sounded overwhelmingly relieved. Eleven didn't understand Joyce's confusion. The child had *known* Hop was trustworthy all along! It wasn't a question for El. *Why would his trust be questioned in the first place?*

"...he is," El agreed in a soft murmur, pursing her lips thoughtfully. Joyce smiled, sorrow still dwelling in those dark brown orbs. Just as she was contemplating their earlier departure, mulling over how sudden it'd been...those flashing lights reached them through the dark, steadily growing in proximity and brightness, like warning signs. El shifted to the right side of the car, peering out through the tiny, backseat window at the abandoned vehicle. Joyce drove on past it, creasing her brow and feeling a troublesome pit lodge itself in her

gut...*knowing* she should stop and check on whoever owned that car. Eventually, she slowed to a reluctant stop, thirty yards ahead of the car behind them, her tires resting on the shoulder. Twisting in her seat to leer through the back window, she watched the short-haired girl gaze through it, her hands clutching the seat cushions, silent and curious, her head and shoulders silhouetted in the flashing lights. Worriedly, Eleven peered back to Joyce, wide eyes full of silent questions. She'd spent enough nights in the forest to accrue quite an appreciation for the little things...like Joyce's house. She didn't want to spend any unnecessary time out here in the dark...it brought all of those images back to her in horrifically acute detail. Meanwhile, Joyce was struggling with questions of her own. *Why the hell did you stop? Why didn't you just keep driving? Anyone else would!*

El picked up on the woman's indecision, recognizing that look because she knew the feel of it on her face. She waited, hoping Joyce would decide soon, because Eleven was *exhausted*. When the girl yawned, it was all the reason Joyce needed to tighten her lips, turn around and continue on down the road. El glanced back at the lonely car as it shrunk in size, the darkness of the forest swallowing up those lights like thick fog. They were both puzzled, but at least Eleven could push it from her mind, thinking nothing of it. Joyce stared, dull-eyed down the road, turning on towards her own street, feeling that sweat on her skin seep with every dangerous thought. They parked, much to Eleven's contentment. "We're home," Joyce announced, folding the seat for El to climb out. Her socked feet nestled themselves into that thick, green grass, breathing in the night air in a yawn. "Let's get you to bed..." Joyce chuckled, the end of her statement spiraling upwards in another yawn.

"Is it true?" El asked out of nowhere, walking with her to the porch as Joyce fumbled her keys.

"...what?"

"That thing...being...con-tag-ious?" she did her best to sound out the word, referring to the yawns Joyce and her had just shared. Dustin had told her about it in passing, and at the time it'd seemed like a ludicrous assumption. A yawn wasn't the same as being sick...at least she *hoped* it wasn't. *So how could it be contagious?*



"Oh YES! They're *very* contagious..." Joyce affirmed with a broadening of her eyes, her voice light and playful. El's face brightened and a smile graced her lips. Joyce continued her childish antics, "*Sometimes* you can even catch it from dogs and cats. I bet, that if we tried hard enough...we could get Huxley to yawn." El giggled, the uncultured sound hiccuping about in her throat and making her drop her smile, eyes wide with shock. Rather than ask if she was alright, Joyce laughed along with her, encouraging that silly warmth to find a home in El's mind. Within seconds, the girl was beaming again, as if nothing wrong had happened, as if everything that was new and beautiful to her was alright, which it was. They walked inside and watched Huxley round a corner, his tail wagging happily. The instant he recognized the strange girl, he froze in his tracks, his tail drooping to hang behind him. "...have you met Huxley? He's an outside dog so...maybe you didn't see him..."

"...yes..." El watched him, her brow bent with grief. There was still that look of half-baked fear in those animalistic eyes of his, and Joyce recognized it too.

"Oh...he's just being weird then," she remarked with a close of the door. Joyce stepped further into her home, calling for her sons, "Jonathan? Will?" Eleven remained standing by the door, watching Huxley watch her with wary contempt. Joyce reappeared, sighing to herself, "...they must still be at the concert..." She rubbed her forehead with a tired hand, knowing there were still things she had to talk to Will about. Huxley barked, shaking them both from their thoughts quite joltingly. Joyce eyed him glaringly, "What is wrong with...?" She noticed his food bowl sat empty, and Joyce peered over at El, who hadn't yet left the door. The look of regret mixed with a little fear Joyce saw on her face made her chest sting, and she knew it couldn't go on like this. It had to be remedied. "...here, come in. I have an idea," Joyce waved her over. As El reluctantly stepped closer, the dog promptly retreated into the kitchen, cornering himself by the back door and whining fretfully. That sound *grated* El's nerves and her brow pinched. "It's okay...here," Joyce knelt down to his food box, pulling it open and scooping some out with a tiny pail. "Hold out your hands. Like a cup," Joyce instructed, and El cupped her hands before her. Those tiny, brown pellets were poured into her palms, dry and gritty...and smelling quite distasteful. The girl grimaced in a tiny

contortion, and she eyed Joyce worriedly, afraid she was going to be asked to try some. Thankfully, Joyce whistled, beckoning the dog over with kind, soothing words, "Come here buddy! It's alright...come on! She's a friend."

As Huxley approached, his tail folded between his legs, El held the food out to him, crouching before Joyce. A cold sweat suddenly worked its way out of El's skin, but Joyce's motherly hand rested on the girl's small shoulder, and she murmured, "Don't be scared. He's a good dog...he's never bitten anyone before." El blinked, remembering *very clearly* how Huxley latched onto Lonnie's ankle the instant she hit the ground. As the dog's wet nose touched her fingers, his tail swooped side to side in a slow motion, and before El could prepare to be bitten, he eagerly began eating from her hands. The whiskers and fur tickled her palms, and she couldn't help but let out a tiny chortle, gazing up at Joyce in relief. "See?" El turned back to Huxley and her eyes snapped open. Her hands were now empty and the dog was getting closer and closer...to her face. That pink tongue slid across El's cheek and she shuddered backwards into Joyce's arms, giggling and pushing Huxley off of her. Both humans burst into chuckles as the dog made a fervent effort to smother the child in wet, slobbery kisses.

Jonathan burst into the house, stopping at the threshold to blink at the scene before him. El and his mother peered over as Huxley rushed to greet them, barking with excitement. He blinked again, soft eyes gathering that everything *had* in fact worked itself out. *She looks well*, he thought. A part of him wondered if Nancy knew yet, and how involved Hop was in returning her to them...because he was starting to get the feeling that this really was her home. Joyce had been right.

*Maybe she really did belong here...*

As the girls stood up, Jonathan found it in him to chuckle, "...so you finally met Huxley, huh?" El nodded, watching as Will walked through the door, tossing it shut behind him. There was no smile on his face, even as he saw her. In fact, upon his arrival...the room drastically lowered in volume, practically falling silent. He reached down to pet Huxley and Eleven noticed an immediate connection between the two, recognizing that special affinity they shared. *She counted herself lucky if Huxley didn't decide to eat her*. She could tell

they loved each other upon first glance; whether or not it had to do with Will's disappearance mattered nothing to her. Jonathan glanced from Joyce, then back to Will, eventually breaking the silence with, "...we grabbed dinner on our way back. Did you know Clarksville had a diner on the highway?"

Joyce scoffed, her voice one of feigned incredulousness, "Uh...*yeah!* I took you there when you were *three!*"

Jonathan smirked, "Oh...*sorry.* Can't remember." There seemed to be like they had to say more, but didn't have the words for it. Either that, or they needed privacy. "...Mom, can I talk to you about something?" As these words fell from his mouth, Will eyed him alarmingly. Jonathan avoided his gaze, focusing in on their mother.

She returned a suspicious but understanding expression, "...*yeah.* Sure." Only then did they both look to Will, who now had to fight hard to hide his *all-consuming* urge to plead with his brother. *He's going to tell her about the slugs. She's going to lose it!* Will and Jonathan stared each other down, and for once, Will misread his brother's soft gaze, knowing he was about to betray him.

After a long moment of this silent exchange, the boy rolled his eyes and muttered, "...I'll be in my room."

"Oh and...take El with you," Joyce nodded, gesturing for the girl to follow. As the older of the Byers' clan conversed about their most recent events, Will and El stood in his bedroom. El watched as he kicked the door shut on his way, tensing his jaw and clenching his fists.

Will sighed as if he were bearing the weight of a thousand cumbersome books, "...they're probably talking about what to do with me..."

Eleven eyed him absently, "...why?" If they had to decide what to do with anyone, it was most definitely her.

"...because of what happened..." he trailed off with another heated exhale, shaking his head like a pendulum. It was still such a shock to Will; Lonnie being gone. He wasn't sure *he* even believed it.

"...what...happened?" she gently pressed, eyeing the carpet.

"...it doesn't matter...I-I don't wanna talk about it. Not right now..." he managed in an even tone, gazing out through his window. Gingerly, El joined him by the glass, peering out sleepily. He noticed how her coffee-brown eyes kept drifting shut against the moonlight, her chin in her hand, holding the rest of her head up. *At least El is safe.* He hardly knew her, compared to Mike and the others...but he knew she had a great deal to do with his rescue. "...you look swamped," he observed in a funny tone. She nodded, eyes still closed against the soft light. Against the current of everything else swirling about in his brain, something wracked the back of his mind, and he figured now was a good time to ask. Now was *perfect*, in fact. To him, El was suddenly so much more than a pleasant distraction from the rest of his problems. *She was the key.* "Hey...can I ask you something?"

"Mm-hm..." the sleepy girl nodded, fluttering her eyelids open to look at him. The way his eyes changed...the *apprehension* they held in those caramel orbs of his; it sat her up straight to eye him, trying hard to shake the sleep from her brain, like cobwebs from a downy pillow.

"...do you ever dream? A-About that *place*?" There was a long moment where El simply stared at him, trying to read his thoughts.

"...yes," she admitted, blinking slow and deliberate. "...all the time."

"...*all the time*?" Will repeated, as if this was an impossibility for him. El nodded, blinking at his sudden epiphany, perplexed at what had him so excited. "...d-do you ever feel like, you're...*there* when you dream about it? Like...you can smell the air and feel the ground? And the webs?" Yes. They both knew those webs far too well. They absolutely *smothered* the Upside Down, like icing on a cake, clinging to nearly everything in earnest.

El widened her eyes at this, shaking her head in confusion. "...nothing."

Will blinked in confusion, "...nothing?"

"Nothing...the In-Between," she explained, watching him closely as an imperception rooted itself between them. "...there's nothing..."

They stared at each other for a long moment, breathing the silence until Will said, "...I was talking about...the Upside Down."

El straightened up, her fatigue deserting her entirely. Her heart sped up at the very *thought* of that place. "...no. You can't..." she shook her head. *That was impossible. There was no gate.* El began peering around his room, half-expecting to see some kind of inter-dimensional crack in time and space just lying around somewhere, maybe hiding behind a stuffed animal or a pillow. *Nothing.*

"I know...m-maybe they're just dreams..." Will shrugged. "...I guess, maybe it's all in my head," he surmised, peering off to gaze outside. Eleven could not look away, demanding his attention back to her with those eyes. *She sometimes wished she could believe it was all in her head...*

When Will slowly peered back to face her, that look of content fell. She did not appear convinced. "...Will?"

"...y-yeah?" he stammered.

"...when?" He blinked, so she clarified. "...Upside Down...when?"

"...oh...only sometimes...like when I'm sleeping, or..." Will sucked in a breath then, glancing towards the door to ensure his mother hadn't suddenly appeared in the passage. "...when I puke up the slugs..."

El creased her brow, worry pricking her every nerve and thought. She *had* to collect her jargon if she was going to ask him this correctly. It was so much harder for Eleven than it looked, finding the right words. Will watched her inhale deeply, as if preparing to belt out a high-pitched note for a choir. Instead, she focused sharply, salvaging *all* of her mental clarity to ask Will this dire question, because she *needed* to know. *They* needed to know...and suddenly she wished Dustin or Nancy was here, with their beautiful minds and courageous hearts. *And brilliant voices.* "Will, when you-"

The door swung open, and both kids jumped quite viciously, turning

to glare at their mother. "Alright, time for bed!" she announced. With a deep sigh, El turned to Will, pursing her lips.

"It's alright. We can talk more tomorrow," he offered. El smiled tiredly, nodding in agreement. Silently, she left, and Joyce stepped in, leaving El in the hall for a moment. She remained there, figuring they might need some time to talk, by themselves. Something bumped her foot and she looked down to notice a half-shredded cord of ropes. Curiosity driving her like a cat, Eleven reached down to pick up Huxley's toy. With a knowing grin, she stepped into the living room, gripping the toy in her hand.

As Joyce approached the bed, eventually sitting down on it, his smile faded. She smoothed a spot beside her, "Here. Sit by me for a second..." Will knew what this was about, and he reluctantly drew himself from the window, plopping down beside her with a bounce of the mattress. On instinct, she wrapped both arms around him, bringing him close to her chest, nuzzling his hair with her chin. "...Jonathan told me about what happened at the diner..." she began, holding him close, both of them gazing through the window. They could see the cat's eye of a moon, winking at them through the trees. She didn't even know what time it was...things had been so hectic that Joyce nearly lost all sense of it. If it weren't for the sun and moon...she would've gone mad by now.

Will swallowed a breath. *He had to be strong, and brave. Like Eleven and Jonathan.* "I didn't mean to do that to Jonathan...I was just..." Will trailed off hopelessly, remembering how terribly lost he'd felt upon pushing through the diner's doors.

"...what do you mean?" she checked, peeking down at him questioningly. Will peered up at her. *She didn't know! Of course!* If Joyce had known Will was regularly vomiting *living* slugs, she would've driven him right to a hospital to get his stomach pumped... or *worse!* *Jonathan hadn't told her!* Against all odds, Will suddenly regained all faith in his brother, realizing he truly was on his side, for better or worse. He suddenly realized his mother was *still* eyeing him, *oh crap! He had to come up with something! Quick, anything!*

"...when I...called him a liar. I...I didn't believe him..." He figured Jonathan would've talked to her about that.

Joyce scoffed, hugging him closer, "...he can take worse. Don't worry about that." A draw in their conversation, accompanied by the sounds of Huxley romping about in the living room. "...at first...I didn't believe Hop either, when he told us..." There was a HUGE flaw in the delicacy of how Joyce had planned on delivering this news to her youngest son. Joyce had been at work brainstorming other means of death for her ex – as gruesome as it was, thinking about that – because she didn't want Will to be worried sick...like she and Hop currently were. The scariest part of it all was that they weren't done running yet, and what those scientists wanted would be living here, beneath this very same roof.

"...are we gonna have a funeral?" Will asked, peering up at his mother.

*Funeral? What funeral?* Joyce was so lost in her thoughts that she had to scramble to answer. "Well, yes. I think so. I'll have to get in touch with Cynthia, though..."

Will chuckled, "*That* should be fun..." Joyce blinked, pursing her lips. *You have NO idea...*she wanted to say.

She peered down at him, giving his shoulder a shake with the crook of her elbow, "...I just wanna make sure *you're* okay."

Will smiled up at her, taking an almost unnoticeable moment before replying with a convincing, "...I'm okay."

"You sure?" she checked, her brow rising.

"...yeah. I'll be okay," he nodded reassuringly at her, leaning into her chest and returning his gaze to the window.

She smiled down at him, "That's my strong man..." They both chuckled as Joyce gazed out at the blue moonlight. "If you *ever* wanna talk about it or...anything, just let me know...okay?"

"I will," he swore, leaning his head beneath her chin. Peeking from the corner of his eye to check the door, he felt he could say this with his manliness intact, "...I love you Mom."

"I love you too Will..." Joyce held him a bit closer, cradling his head

with hers. After a long, warm moment, Joyce held him out before her, running a teasing hand through his chestnut locks. "And BOY... do you need a haircut! I mean, *look* at this mess!"

"Oh...*Mom!* It's *fine*..." he chuckled, brushing her hand away and smiling.

"I know...I know. I'll have to find out where I put the clippers..." she chuckled to herself, kissing him on the forehead. She rose to her feet, stopping just before she closed his door to lean back in. "Sleep well, *my wizard*..." she cooed in a *very* childish tone.

Will leered at her, his cheeks shading a dark red. El turned back to make sure she'd heard Joyce correctly, jumping as Will droned, "*Mom*..." The boy rolled his eyes, burying his head in his pillow.

She snickered uncontrollably, "Goodnight Will."

He groaned, "Night Mom..." With a throaty chortle, she gingerly shut his door, turning to see El watching her, that soft brow considerably raised.

"You ready for bed?" she asked, eyeing the line of saliva dangling from Eleven's hand. Joyce grimaced just as the girl nodded and Huxley returned, mouthing the toy and holding it out for El again, practically pushing it into her hand. Wiping her palm on her pants, El pet Huxley on the head before following Joyce into her room. Slowly but surely, that tail stopped, and the toy dropped like a stone from the dog's mouth. He trotted to Jonathan, who was cleaning up the dishes for tomorrow morning. Huxley's bark nearly sent a slippery plate crashing to the floor.

He gasped throatily, turning to glare at the animal. "...w-would you cut that out?!" he barked back, sighing through his teeth. It hadn't been easy for him to keep Will's secret from Joyce. *He'd wanted to...he really had.* His only consolation was that – and this fact haunted him to no end – there was a chance these slugs would keep coming...that they would never end, and Joyce would *eventually* find out the hard way.

He preferred to look on the bright side. To him, each slug Will puked



up meant one less in his stomach. It could always potentially be the last one. There was no telling, but as Will lay down to sleep, flattening out on the bed, something *moved* inside his stomach. The boy immediately sat upright, pushing himself from the bed and stifling a gasp. He placed a hand flat against his belly...waiting for that same writhing feeling. Aside from the occasional digestive rumble, all was still in there...*maybe I dreamt it*. That was the first thing he thought of. *Maybe I imagined the feeling...like how I imagined myself in the Upside Down last time*. It was something to go on, and it certainly helped him find some semblance of sleep. As Eleven snuggled against Joyce's frame, comfortably beneath the covers for the first time in a while, Will drifted off to dream, lounging back into that subconscious realm only *he* could access...only *he* could venture to. It was Will's favorite part about sleeping...but this was different.

*As he was catapulted into an already moving scene, Will realized with much shock that he was still in his room. Nothing had changed...it was all the same, except...it was morning. An orange glow was hanging around the settling dust, illuminating each tiny particle like glimmering snowflakes. He turned to his right and nearly screamed. Thankfully, the noise caught in his throat, or else his father would've been quite confused. "...you payin' attention?" Astounded, Will wordlessly nodded, still watching him with those wide, hazel eyes. "Good..." Hints of this encounter became familiar to him. "...you're six now...it's about time you learned how to tie your shoes properly. That way your poor mother and I won't have to do it ourselves...you got it?" Will (trapped inside his six-year-old body) nodded, shamelessly self-aware of how troublesome it must've been for his "poor parents." Lonnie grinned, sitting him on the bed and kneeling before his tiny feet. "Alright, now...what you wanna do first is tighten the laces," he pulled them tight in their crossings.*

*"Ow..." Will squeaked, giggling in a carefree, lighthearted manner. "That's too tight!" The words came out on their own, like scripted lines, proving to Will that he had little to no control over this dream. It was akin to some kind of estranged memory.*

*Lonnie paused a minute, which would've confused a younger Will, and then, as if he had to think hard about what to say, he chuckled, "...w-whoops! Sorry 'bout that little guy." Lonnie grinned and Will laughed with him...and the older, restrained Will knew what his father had just done.*

*He'd forced himself to be more like Joyce...and it'd taken some effort on his part, but at the very least, he'd done it! It was one of those shining moments that made Will think Lonnie would somehow come around; that he'd stop fighting with Joyce and drinking so much. That he wouldn't yell at Jonathan so loudly over the tiniest of things. "Okay...now, you pull this one over the other...and then you make bunny ears..." Lonnie continued teaching him this small yet vital skill, smiling all the while and simultaneously managing to make it an enjoyable process for his son. Will gazed down at the bunny ears, grinning to himself from ear-to-ear. On the inside, Will seethed. He had so many questions he obviously wouldn't be able to ask in this setting. Why'd you do it, Dad? Why'd you fight her? What did she ever do to you?! All words he couldn't equivocate...*

*Instead, a younger Will exclaimed, "Wow! Thanks Dad!" He took a bit of time to study the tied laces, two bunny ears draping comically over each other. He peered up at the empty space before him and blinked. His father was gone, like a cloud of dust. Poof!*

*Forever.*

Will's eyes shot open, absorbing the dark while simultaneously leaking bitter sadness. He gripped the pillow, curling in on himself and trying not to think about it, failing to ignore it, eventually thinking about it and crying even more. *They killed him.* Jonathan's words came back to him and Will held his breath, swallowing a sob back down to his heart. What stung the most was how Will had thought he wouldn't care this much. *Did Jonathan care? He didn't seem upset when he told me.* Will had to gulp down another cry, pressing his face into the mattress and coiling onto himself like an armadillo. The more he tried to forget, the more it pestered his mind. So with great reluctance, Will exhaled, his breath shaky and his fists clenched. Tears rolled down and across his nose, falling through the space between that bridge and the plush of his pillow. He fought hard to find sleep again, clenching a hand against his stomach in an almost warning gesture.

He didn't have time for any more visits right now.

As the moon trailed along the sky, a man slowly picked his way along the hard-packed dirt, the beam of his flashlight a solid ray of clean, white light. The light from above painted the grass bordering his

driveway an almost blue color, along with everything else... everything besides the lake. He could swear that water was just a mirror for the moon to pick its teeth into, and after taking a momentary glance out at the breathtaking spectacle, he continued combing the length of his yard. Discerning that the wind must've blown it somewhere else, he was about to abandon his search when the unthinkable occurred. A tiny, yellow ball peeked at him from the arms of a bush, and even now, the wind threatened to throw it away. That invisible hand was going to pick it up and drown it in the lake. *He needed that number.* Without thinking, he thrust his hand into the bush, painfully retrieving the balled-up note, extricating it from those tight-wound thorns. He merely sighed at the pain, gritting his teeth so the air hissed through his lips. Bracing the flashlight below his chin, he unfolded the slip of paper, holding it out before him in the failing light. Eleven digits stood before him, all written in thin, black ink...and he gritted his teeth against his fury, somehow managing to hate himself *even more* for being able to find the note in the first place. Thrusting the note into his pocket, Hopper exhaled steam into the dark, pacing about for a bit, then eventually turning in for what little night he had left. As much as he liked to think otherwise, he needed his sleep. There was much to do.

As the sun peeked over the horizon, squinting at humanity from between the clouds, Dustin was dragging himself out of bed. It was just another lazy Sunday for the Hendersons...but Dustin knew he had a loaded day ahead of him. Plodding into his kitchen, he instinctively reached for a box of cereal, then paused, eyeing the stove-top. He stayed like that for a few more seconds, talking something over with himself in his head. Finally, he abandoned the cereal on top of the fridge, pulling open one of the doors and grabbing six eggs. Trying hard to hold them all at once, one of the smooth white ovals tumbled to the floor, splintering its yellow innards right next to his toe. "Son of a bitch..." he muttered, placing the remaining eggs safely on the counter.

After cleaning the mess, Dustin set about cooking the remaining five, scrambling them as best he could. With a touch of milk, some salt and pepper...they were looking as good as whenever his mother made them. *There's something missing...* he puzzled, squinting at the fridge searchingly, as if it would lend him the answer. "...oh yeah..."

he mused, retrieving a block of cheddar from one of the chilled drawers. Grating it *right* over the scrambled eggs, Dustin set the block down next to the stove-top, stirring the gooey, melting goodness in, mixing the ingredients. Now that he was fully awake, early morning thoughts slowly made their way into his mind...*I wonder if El's ever had eggs.* He pursed his lips, scooping the spongy yellow globs into two bowls and turning off the burner. Pouring two glasses of milk, Dustin somehow balanced both meals in his arms, heading towards his basement.

Edward sat amongst the cluttered, dusty items, poring over the numerous, interchangeable gears of a broken clock. He sat at the entrance-way to a maze only he knew the way through. The walls were towering piles of old books, tools, discarded toys, and other miscellaneous items...stacked nearly to the ceiling. Pressing a magnifying glass nearly against his eyeball, he determinedly wet his lips, set the glass down and grabbed a miniature screwdriver. He leaned back in to squint at the tiny mechanisms, screwdriver poised at the ready, resting comfortably between his knobby, old knuckles. The rest of that cluttered space lay, shrouded in the dark, the only light pouring down from a single lamp, towering over his head like a palm tree. As he steadied his breathing, he gingerly lodged the screwdriver in place, twisting it with slow, methodical turns of his fingers.

Mr. and Mrs. Henderson couldn't fathom sending him to some kind of *home* to live out the rest of his days...old and forgotten. What with the rumors of elder abuse steadily circulating throughout Mrs. Henderson's social circle...she just couldn't go through with it. What sickened them even more was how this rumor seemed to perpetuate all walks of life...yet no one lifted a finger to put an end to such practices. It was that elephant in the room no one spoke about...yet everyone could sense it's foul, malignant presence like the worst kinds of cancer. So, they gave him the basement, of which Edward was quite grateful.

He was a seasoned, self-trained tinkerer, eager and able to take things apart, spread the pieces out before him and learn everything there was to know about anything he dismantled. These procedures – as his family rapidly came to realize – took some time. Occasionally he'd

spend hours planted before that table, puzzling over the parts of a flashlight...but the results were definitely worth the wait. Not only was Edward able to repair these broken things, he remembered how to multiply his efforts from then on forward. If there was a manual for the object he was repairing, he outright refused to use it.

...he was old fashioned like that.

A man who favored peace and quiet as he worked, Edward was a bit of a hermit. If someone interrupted him, his first response was usually a heavy sigh. He'd swallow his frustration though, and talk to them as politely as he could. Once the exchange was done (or at least when he deemed it expired) he'd promptly return to his task at hand, shutting the rest of the world out as he tinkered away. It was quite taxing to hinder him in any manner, for Edward possessed a one-track mind, inflexible and sharply focused on completing one goal, *then* shifting gears and moving onto the next.

Currently, the tinkerer had three projects to complete, the most consuming of them being his daughter's cuckoo clock. He'd never fixed clocks before, and this was easily the most difficult thing he'd worked on to date. So, one could imagine Dustin's trepidation as he knocked on the basement door, beads of sweat forming around his temple. Letting his arms drop to the table like lifeless tentacles, Edward sighed, "*Oh...come in!*"

Dustin pursed his lips, pushing the door open and gingerly stepping down the stairs. "Morning Granddad..." he greeted, his voice slightly trembling.

Edward picked up on this rather quickly, turning to watch as the boy balanced two bowls on top of two cups, each dish filled with food or drink. His eyes widened, but he said nothing. *Edward knew the importance of focus, and how much interruption could potentially ruin a person's inner clarity.* The mere fact that Dustin hadn't yet suffered a catastrophe was unbelievable, and as he tight-rope-walked to Ed's table, the old man blinked for a second, then cleared a space on his workbench. Like a plane setting down, Dustin placed the dishes down on the flat surface, exhaling with utter relief. "Phew...I didn't think I'd make it this far..."

Edward hummed, looking his grandson up and down, "...neither did I!" They both chuckled for a moment, then Edward turned to the food. "...this for me?"

"Yeah! I made it. Scrambled eggs and milk," Dustin beamed, taking a seat on the bench beside him.

"Oh..." the old man droned. "Thank you!" he nodded to the boy, taking a bowl and scooping some egg into his mouth. Then, to Dustin's horror, Edward scrunched his face, as if he was tasting something horribly bitter.

Dustin froze mid bite, "...oh! Did I add too much pepper?"

Edward shook his head, "No no...you forgot the *ketchup*!" Silence for a moment, then Dustin broke into a grin.

"I didn't know you liked ketchup on your eggs!" Dustin giggled, rising to his feet.

"...who doesn't?!" Ed prompted, shrugging his shoulders comically. With a chuckle, Dustin rushed upstairs, returning within moments, carrying the red bottle of *Heinz*. He squeezed a generous lathering onto Edward's eggs, then his. "That's better," Edward chortled, mixing it in with his fork. Dustin copied his action, and for a moment, their arms moved in sync, like two cogs on a moving machine, occasionally bumping elbows as they mashed yellow into red. Then, out of the blue, Edward asked, "So what do you want?"

*Oh crap.* Edward had thrown a decisive cog into his machine, and Dustin sat, frozen in place. "...w-what do you mean?"

"Oh come on Dustin...I can tell you want me to fix something of yours. What is it?" his grandfather droned in a knowing tenor, rolling his eyes affectionately. "...you don't hafta' make me eggs whenever you want something." Dustin blinked, those blue eyes wide with shock. *Had he really made him eggs whenever he'd asked for help?* He dug back in his memory, and to his own horror...*Ed was right!* "I mean...you could make me eggs *every* mornin', if you wanted!" Ed shrugged, chuckling warmly and nudging Dustin's side.

Dustin sighed, "...well...it's just...some *assholes* sliced our tires..."

Edward straightened up, his brow pinched with fury. Those old eyes opened up with anger, "...on the *car*?!"

"...no! On...my bike. And all my friends' bikes..." he trailed off, bringing a glass to his lips. Almost like a mirror, and without thinking, Ed reached for his milk at the same time, sipping from it loudly, then setting it back down with a sigh.

"Okay, good...you had me worried for a second," he gazed off at the wall, strewn over with pictures of the family who lived just above him, finding that picture of a three-year-old Dustin easily amidst the others. His hair was shorter back then, but still *just* as hectically curly. "So...you're saying some punks *sliced* your tires?" Dustin nodded, pursing his lips a tad shamefully. "...you know who?"

"No...but we have a pretty good idea," Dustin sighed, crossing his arms in front of him, resting them on the desk. "I would fix them myself...I just don't know how..." Dustin sighed, as if this was a major shortcoming for twelve-year-olds across America.

Edward blinked, "...well...how's about I teach you?"

Dustin peered up at him, eyes wide and blue with unrestrained wonder, "...really?"

His grandfather nodded calmly, shrugging his shoulders as if it was no big deal, "Sure! We might need to go to the store for some parts... but we should be able to fix it. No problem at all!"

Then there was that smile, crossing nearly his entire face and dimpling his cheeks, making his eyes twinkle. "Thanks Granddad," he said, blinking at him with gratitude.

"Eh...don't worry about it kiddo..." he sighed, nudging his shoulder. "You still gotta teach those delinquents a lesson they'll *never* forget!"

Dustin chuckled, "Alright Granddad, I will!" Here was the inspiration for all of his courage, all of his fire, sitting downstairs amidst the clutter of his basement. The boy didn't know this, but in his day, Edward had been a bit of a part-time hero. His favorite hobby (back

then) was putting those playground bullies in their place, defending the weak and innocent...but mostly making those meaner kids eat the dirt. It was no wonder he went to fight in the war...and came back, alive and well. Dustin finished his meal, scrutinizing his mother's dismantled clock, focusing in on the beak of the bird, wide open in a silent, wooden cry. Once they were both done, Ed rose to his feet, stretching his back. A symphony of cracks shot up and down his spine and he gasped almost pleasurably.

Dustin chortled at the clicking joints, as did his grandfather, shaking out the kinks in his wrists and elbows. "Let's go see that bike then..." Ed proposed, prudently adjusting the tiny pieces of the clock in such a manner that he'd be able to remember where he'd left off in his work.

"Okay!" Dustin nodded eagerly, grabbing the dishes and rushing back upstairs.

Before he mounted that first step, Edward turned to glare at the table, his silver eyes honing in on that damn clock. "I'll deal with you later..." he growled under his breath, only angry with himself that he hadn't been able to figure out how to fix it yet. Then, gripping the railing, he started up those steps, flushing out the light with a flick of a switch. Thoughtfully, he closed the old, wooden door, and he imagined it stood white and jeering, separating him from his greatest challenge yet.

Far away, in the city of Indianapolis, a young, floozy of a woman clomped towards her house. The rain came down in decisive bullets of water, thoroughly tempering her normally frazzled hair into a drenched, muddled mess. The first day he went missing, she'd thought nothing of it. It wasn't uncommon for Lonnie to get drunk and lose himself somewhere...but on day two, she'd started calling his relatives, avoiding Joyce Byers' number purely out of spite. She'd been starting to grow a little worried. On the third day, she'd grown sick of the feeling, eating at her very bones. So, she marched into Hawkins Police Station, and they told her everything they knew. She'd been living on her own for four days now, without her fiancé... and his car. Cynthia held a binder up over her head, hoping the water wouldn't smear her makeup, forgetting the fact that the binder was stuffed to the brims with important documents her lawyer *specifically*



asked her to keep safe. No, that request was whisked so carelessly from her mind.

Because her makeup was definitely more important.

Cynthia had been working on the beginnings of a lawsuit against Hawkins Police Department, filing for the disappearance of her fiancé. Hop surely had something to do with it...*that smug bastard*. Almost intentionally, the rain pattered even harsher against that horizontal side, rushing off in tiny currents and trickling down her neck, invading her treasured privacy. The girl shivered, wrenching an arm back to press those rivulets against her shirt in a feverish attempt to cure that icy feeling. She huffed deeply into her exasperation, stepping lighter and quicker on towards her home, seething with anger.

As she walked, those vital documents slowly becoming more and more soaked, a car sidled up beside her, it's muffler purring loudly. "Hey baby...what you doin' tonight?"

She turned to glare at the man inside. His smile was all teeth, wide and yellow...and to be quite honest with herself, his *car* was more attractive than *he* could ever hope to be. She'd procured quite the weakness for men with swell rides...and his was a decked out, '84 Toyota Celica Supra. He'd painted it a royal shade of purple, black lightning bolts standing out against the hood like awesome scars, stretching all the way back to the bumper. *He must be sitting on a gold mine*, she thought. Still, that earlier anger swelled within her, and it was simply too much to ignore. She couldn't feign interest in this guy, no matter how nice his ride was. So, she replied quite tersely with, "...nothing with you, *that's* for sure."

His smile dropped, and the car decelerated, almost to a stop behind her. She kept walking, ignoring his very presence, abandoning the purple Supra like a wad of trash. Still, as she walked on she could feel his glare burning through back of her head. It was all over her, like the rain, which was currently pooling everywhere, collecting in large puddles at the edges of the roads like water basins. Just when Cynthia imagined he was finished staring daggers at her, she heard that engine roar to life. She whirled around just in time to spot him *speeding* towards her, and for a heart stopping moment, she

considered his sanity. Helplessly, she thought, *he's going to flatten me!* Instead, he drove on past her, and as one of his tires slammed into a particularly deep puddle, it kicked a tidal wave of filthy, street water onto the poor girl, effectively dousing her with the streets of her town.

If she thought she was wet before, she was kidding herself. She was thoroughly *drenched*, the deluge working its way into places water shouldn't be unless you were fully submerged. She stood, gasping as the cold seized her lungs, gaping dumbly at the purple vehicle. The driver hooted and hollered like a cowboy, raising hell as he sped down the road, snickering to himself as Cynthia tried not to cry. Once she registered what had just happened, she **screamed** after him, "**YOU FUCKING PRICK!**" Her raised arms and prominent social finger were just a blur to him as he rounded a corner, making her eat his proverbial dust. "...*UGH!*" she screeched, slamming her hands to her sides and stomping on down the road. Luckily, her house lay just ahead. Cynthia drew comfort from the rapidly oncoming thoughts of what Lonnie would do to that asshole if he saw the splash hit her... *the nerve of that guy!* She was certain he would chase after him in his Oldsmobile, maybe even run him into a ditch, if he was lucky. Then he would learn his lesson, she was sure of it. As she fantasized different methods of exacting her revenge on the man in the purple Supra, she turned onto the sloping stone path leading to her home. It forked in two directions, and she took the left, stomping up each stone step, then turning onto her porch. The overhang offered her a slight reprieve from the rain, but Indianapolis' pollution and runoff still clung to her so fiercely it didn't even matter.

She fumbled with the keys, slippery wet from the rain. "Come on..." she hissed through gritted teeth, eventually grappling the correct one out from the others and sliding it into the slot. With a twist, the blue door opened up, and Cynthia stopped at the threshold, a tiny pool of astonished water collecting at her motionless feet.

Her scream tore through the neighborhood, echoing against the slapping rain and the growling car engines. That binder was the first to drop, the papers whisking everywhere, sticking to the floor in inebriated bunches, the ink seeping from the words like midnight blood. Then it was her turn, and she collapsed quite miraculously to

her knees, weeping into her hand and wiping the water from her face, trying to discern how much of it was her tears and how much was rainwater.

She'd finally found her fiancé.

*To be continued...*

Authors Note: Wow...my chapters are getting kind of dark. Sheesh... sorry to leave you guys on *THAT* note, but I couldn't think of any other way to end it. Anyway, I sincerely hope you all enjoyed this! I think I'm getting back into the groove of things. Again, I've been very busy this week. Today has been the only day I actually had time to sit down and write in one long stretch. Hopefully it's okay and doesn't feel too rushed. I really enjoy doing this, so I hope you guys are liking it too!

A couple of you amazing people have told me you like how I portray Eleven. First of all, thank you SO MUCH! It's...difficult to write El sometimes, because she's such a silent force. Mostly everything she thinks about *remains* in her head; either that or it's expressed in her face. She's one of my favorites and I'm glad you guys like how she is in this story. I deeply appreciate the support, and wanted to personally thank all of you who have commented on this. I wanted to spend some time with the other characters as well, so I hope that doesn't detract from the story at all.

Follow for more and leave a review if you wish. Thank you all for the continued support! Love you guys! Keep on writing! -*Nightlock*